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Hong Kong

The rebellion in Hong Kong is intensifying

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Massive demonstrations in Hong Kong have forced the government to shelve a bill that could muzzle dissident voices. But the protesters are still on the streets and they're demanding the resignation of Hong Kong's chief executive.

Hong Kong's ongoing protests are a dramatic reminder that mass street demonstrations can defeat seemingly undefeatable legislation.

Last month, the million-strong marches forced the Hong Kong government to shelve its China extradition bill, which critics say would allow Beijing to muzzle dissident voices in the former British colony. Unsatisfied with mere suspension, protesters have demanded the bill's complete withdrawal and the resignation of Hong Kong's Beijing-approved chief executive, Carrie Lam.

Unlike Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement, which had multiple spokespersons, the youthful protesters reject any leadership and show no interest in channeling their anger into electoral directions. Instead, they have escalated their direct actions, fighting pitched battles with police, momentarily occupying the Legislative Council, and protesting inside the Hong Kong International Airport.

The Chinese government has warned the protesters of touching its "bottom line" of "one country, two systems" (the principle, first devised by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, that treats Hong Kong as part of China but gives it a measure of autonomy). Beijing has even hinted at possible military intervention. Thus far it has refrained from more direct involvement, but the threat of a serious crackdown hangs over the increasingly physical battles, with forty-four protesters just charged with rioting for the first time in two months of demonstrations.

Neither Hong Kong and Beijing nor the protesters show signs of backing down. And given the widespread anger among ordinary citizens of Hong Kong who still lack the ability to choose their chief executive without Beijing's involvement it is not certain that even Carrie Lam's resignation would resolve the impasse.

Jacobin contributor Kevin Lin spoke to longtime socialist and author Au Loong Yu about the intensifying demonstrations, the ideological composition of the protest movement, the role of unions in the upsurge, and the effect that various geopolitical relationships (Beijing and Hong Kong, United States and China) are having on the simmering rebellion.

KL : Since the mass rallies in June, we have seen more militant actions by groups of protesters targeting the Hong Kong authorities. What should we make of this escalation?

ALY : Within the "yellow ribbon" camp there are two factions: the radical youth (who play the vanguard role) and adult supporters and pan-democrats (the liberal opposition since the 1980s that has pushed for universal suffrage while maintaining the "free market" of Hong Kong). The young generation is more determined than the older generation to demand the government withdraw the China extradition bill. There is strong anxiety and bitterness among them and fear that, if they cannot win this time, they will lose forever.

Since July 6 there have been three big protests in different districts. We have also seen cycles of violence between the two sides, although it is always the police who are much more provocative and violent. Despite the violence, the

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young people are still widely supported by the broader yellow ribbon camp. How big is the yellow ribbon camp? The turnout on June 9, June 16, and July 1 was 1 million, 2 million, and half a million, respectively. In contrast, the pro-Beijing “blue ribbon” camp mobilized no more than 150,000.

There is also growing anger among older citizens now. Not only were they duped into believing Beijing’s promise of universal suffrage, but also their children may end up with the same disappointment and face even worse social mobility.

KL : How would you characterize the relationship between the Beijing and Hong Kong governments?

ALY: We have the most absurd situation: everyone knows that it has been Beijing’s decision to rush through the bill, but both Beijing and Carrie Lam continue to pretend that it is entirely the latter’s decision and that the former is just being supportive.

It is Beijing and Carrie Lam’s fault if few believe in them. Since Xi [Jinping] came to power in 2012, his Liaison Office in Hong Kong has broken its predecessors’ policy of keeping a low profile and has become visible in everything in local politics, including meddling in elections. Carrie Lam happily and publicly endorsed Beijing’s intervention since coming to office two years ago. Moreover, the China extradition bill involves Taiwan and therefore goes beyond the Hong Kong government’s usual jurisdiction. How would it be possible for the bill to be brought forward solely by Carrie Lam?

Beijing is widely believed to be using the bill as a bargaining chip in Xi’s negotiation with Trump over the trade war. Hence the rush. Beijing tried to cool the situation down by making Carrie Lam shelve the bill on June 15, but it has no wish to make her take one more step back by withdrawing the bill.

Right now Hong Kong is in a deadlock. Carrie Lam already announced that “the bill is dead,” but because her administration enjoys no legitimacy and everyone knows it is the Liaison Office, not her, who calls the shots, no one will believe her until she officially withdraws the bill.

Yet, according to media reports, it is something she cannot do because this could imply Beijing has also made mistakes “and for Beijing, saving face is always paramount. The need to save face at all costs produces a super rigidity on the part of the Communist Party leadership. This presents less of a problem for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as Beijing is not transparent at all. But Hong Kong still maintains certain elements of liberal governance “accountability, freedom of speech, procedural justice, independence of the judiciary” that give its residents more ability to guess what is happening behind the closed doors of the Liaison Office and the Chief Executive office.

Hence Beijing and the Hong Kong government’s rigidity and lies look even more silly and contemptible. And the youth have not been hesitant to show their complete disdain for the CCP: on the evening of July 21, youngsters sprayed paint on the national emblem of the Liaison Office. Constrained by the politics of “face saving,” both the Liaison Office and Carrie Lam are now left with no alternative but to stick to the old policy of cracking down on the radical youth.

It is a reasonable guess that Beijing is setting traps for the protesters. The July 1 occupation of the legislature is quite suspicious “the police retreated in the face of a besieged legislature, allowing the youngsters to break in. Again, after the big march of July 21, there was a call out of nowhere for continuous marching to the Liaison Office. Yet, before the procession arrived, the police guarding the office had been evacuated, allowing the protestors to spray paint and graffiti on its wall. The same night, mafia indiscriminately attacked passengers in the Yuen Long West Rail. And then another youth suicide occurred that night as well. All these developments have further antagonized the

yellow ribbon camp and may further radicalize the movement.

The CCP has a long record of provoking a premature uprising among people just to legitimize the later bloody crackdown. We should watch closely whether this is the case. The more worrying side of the story is that if Beijing's regime remains stable, a Hong Kong people's uprising probably will not end well.

KL: One of the most encouraging actions during the protests was a call by the unions for worker strikes. But unfortunately, they were unsuccessful in convincing workers to walk out. How would you explain this failure?

ALY: Hong Kong's union density as of 2017 is 25 percent, which isn't low. But this level of density is accomplished through ridiculously low union dues — so low that the main trade unions do not rely on membership dues for their funding but on running retraining programs funded by the government, operating for-profit businesses, or receiving foreign funding, especially from the United States. Few members are really active. Although there are many "industrial unions," most of them are either very small or just in individual workplaces.

Given this, it is not surprising that the call to go on strike was unsuccessful. On the date that the strike was called, a rally was also launched by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) near the government headquarters, but only a few hundred attended.

The HKCTU leadership, for two decades, followed the pan-democrats' advocacy of democracy within the constraints of the Basic Law without any criticism. Even after its leader, Lee Cheuk-yan, founded a small Labour Party in 2011, his party continued to follow the liberal right's political line.

In terms of labor rights, both the Labour Party and the HKCTU have become more outspoken in the past ten years and moved a bit closer to the center left. Yet their long-standing political stances made it difficult to connect with the rising young generation, who tend to despise the pan-democrats. Their inability to pull off a successful strike during the Umbrella Movement in 2014 doubtlessly added to their failure. Finally, Lee and another Labour Party legislator lost their seats in the 2016 legislature election, and Lee failed to win it back in the 2018 by-election. These defeats have meant that both the HKCTU and the Labour Party have only been able to play a marginal role in the present movement.

KL: The protest movement has sparked more discussions in Hong Kong about the special region's relationship with mainland China, with the so-called "localists" — who view the mainland with contempt — playing a prominent role. What are their politics, and how influential are they in the protest movement?

ALY: Western mainstream media outlets tend to view the Hong Kong localists in a positive way, seeing them as democratic fighters against Beijing. Yet the picture is far more complicated. The Chinese term "localism," when first adopted by social movements, was used by people who were broadly leftist. However, it is the right wing that has grown bigger and bigger. These localists are more like nativists — very xenophobic.

Several years before the Umbrella Movement, this current began to gain a following among young people. Their spokespersons were Raymond Wong and scholar Chin Wan-kan. Together with Raymond Wong's apprentice, Wong Yeung-tat, they constituted a xenophobic trio. Their actions in the occupation area consisted of silencing the voices of other democrats, using violence or the threat of violence, making racist statements about Chinese people (calling them "locusts" that should be removed), and attacking Mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong for supposedly stealing government welfare.

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The xenophobia trio also ferociously attacked the HKFS (Hong Kong Federation of Students) during the Umbrella Movement. On October 12, following the call of Chin Wan-kan, the localists went to Mong Kok to disrupt the HKFS street forum. That this later developed into the destruction of its stages, attacks on its pickets, and eventually the dismantling of the HKFS is not surprising.

The xenophobic trio packaged itself as more radical than other currents. Their slogan was “HKFS does not represent us,” and they opposed all signs or symbols of leadership: stages, flags, and attempts to convene an assembly. They were especially keen on calling for *chaidatai*, or “dismantling the stage,” and put it into practice whenever the HKFS held a discussion forum with a stage.

Probably because they were too crude, the trio all lost in the 2016 election, but a younger generation of xenophobic localists was elected, such as Youngspiration. The latter, although a bit more sophisticated, inherited the basic idea of the trio. Their idea of “dismantling the stage” has also influenced the young generation in the anti-China extradition bill campaign, where young radicals favor a “leaderless” movement with “no central stage giving orders.”

There is support for this right-wing localist current among certain social strata. In April 2016, two years after the occupation, one study found that the “localists” enjoyed 8.4 percent support, with that number higher among youth between eighteen and twenty-nine.

Still, people favoring the term “localism” do not have the same interpretation of what it means. The anti-extradition bill movement exhibits many fewer xenophobic tendencies than the Umbrella Movement. This is probably because the old trio is seen as out of fashion, and localists like the Youngspiration have seen their two legislators disqualified by the government and fallen into inactivity since then, leaving today’s young radicals largely on their own. Even if some exhibit prejudice toward Mainland Chinese, this hasn’t been crystalized into a political program or project. So instead of criticizing from the outside, the Left should get involved and try to win the young people over.

KL: What is your understanding of the support, or lack thereof, in mainland China for Hong Kong’s protest movement?

ALY: The repression in Mainland China is surely the most direct factor in isolating and exterminating solidarity efforts with the Hong Kong resistance. But the Chinese regime is also very good at manipulating public opinion. Selective reporting or outright fake news about Hong Kong are the crudest tricks of this game.

There has been a more sophisticated effort by Beijing to tear apart the bond between Hong Kongers and Mainland Chinese. Some people think that the xenophobic trio and their core supporters are Communist Party provocateurs. In 2016, two Youngspiration legislators modified their oaths “pronouncing the word “China” as “Chi-na,” a derogatory term to the Chinese” and Beijing disqualified them, along with four pro-self-determination legislators. This foolish and racist act sparked debate about the real identity of these two localists.

It is difficult to know how far provocateurs have infiltrated into the movement. But objectively speaking, the “localists” have helped Beijing tighten its grip over Hong Kong by provoking China unnecessarily, with their racist politics and attacks on Mainland visitors, immigrants, and the democratic forces. They have also helped Beijing in estranging Mainland Chinese people from Hong Kongers.

KL: How has the US-China rivalry impacted the protest movement, and what are the structural roots of that rivalry?

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ALY: One of the reasons that Beijing decided to make Carrie Lam shelve the bill on June 15 was because China was eager not to make Xi Jinping look bad when he attended the G20 summit in Osaka two weeks later. As for the United States, it surely had sufficient reason to ask difficult questions about the extradition bill, as it was meant to target anyone in Hong Kong, including foreign investors or foreign visitors passing through.

Even if Beijing's decision to shelve the bill helped Xi deal with Trump, it proved incapable of appeasing the Hong Kong protestors. In general, there is strong sympathy for the US government among the liberal media here, especially the *Apple Daily*. The latter is essential in promoting the opposition's view, but it is also heavily pro-US government and even sometimes pro-Trump. This kind of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" logic may push the Hong Kong democratic movement in an undesirable direction.

China's capitalism is a kind of "bureaucratic capitalism," where the ruling class combines the coercive power of the state and the power of capital. This kind of capitalism is highly exploitative, monopolistic, and, importantly, expansionist. Hence the US-China rivalry. Yet we must understand that China is still far from being on par with the United States in many fields.

The last time the United States launched a trade war with the second largest economy in the world was during the 1980s, with Japan. This largely ended after the United States brokered the Plaza Accord, which forced the Japanese yen to appreciate significantly, followed by a 100-percent tariff against Japan's imports. Japan's economy was dealt a big blow, but the US-Japan alliance remained intact.

This time is different, partly because Beijing has learned from the Japanese case. Since the 1980s, the Japanese case has always been the subject of debate among Chinese economists, strategists, and nationalists, and the nationalists' argument has always been the strongest: China, as a developing country, cannot afford a Japanese-style defeat at the hands of the United States, and China must resist the United States if Washington begins to show its teeth. This is precisely what Xi has done so far.

There is another lesson from history as understood by Beijing hard-liners: the only way for a second-rate country to avoid being invaded or bullied is to strive to become the top hegemonic power. Unlike Japan, the CCP under Xi is not going to accept, indefinitely, a second-rate position. Unlike Japan, Xi wants to replace the "Western" version of globalization with his "Chinese" version, right here and now.

It is common to see US presidents bashing China during their election campaigns and then, once in office, turn to engaging China. This cycle seems to have come to an end. Trump may make more tactical twists and turns in the near future, especially when the 2020 election approaches, but the general trend of an intensifying US-China rivalry may persist, because now both the Democrats and the Republicans have consensus over China policy.

This trade war is no regular trade war. It is merely the first battle of a prolonged US-China rivalry, and one that would bring disaster to the world.

KL: What should progressive people in mainland China, Hong Kong, the United States, and elsewhere do to support democratic movements in Hong Kong and reduce tensions between the United States and China?

ALY: The two sides in this rivalry are going to make people choose "either Washington or Beijing." All progressive people, whether in Hong Kong or beyond, should refuse such choices. They are not real choices for working people in Hong Kong, China, or the United States. Workers have nothing to win in this rivalry.

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Trump's project is to make the American army and its corporations great again, and in the course of it to sacrifice working people and the environment, in the United States, China, and the rest of the world. Xi's project of modernizing China, carried out in the name of his people, has no common ground with working people's interests. He is defending interests in the South China Sea while giving away the future of China — its natural resources, its ecological balance, and its people's health. He is defending the mandarins' assets and position while destroying people's livelihood. Hong Kong was essential in the rise of China, and now Beijing is paying back its debt to Hong Kong by defaulting on its promise of granting universal suffrage to Hong Kong.

We must not fall into the nationalist trap of supporting either US aggression or Chinese aggression. That will be the first step toward opposing the US–China rivalry and preventing it from turning into a war.

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