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Hong Kong

The Voice for Change – On Hong Kong’s 2016 Legislative Council Election Results

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The 2016 LegCo election results show a strong call for change. Although politically and socially divided among themselves, it was the first time in Hong Kong history that five candidates ran for election advocating self-determination and were elected on this basis. If we take into consideration that a further two elected legislators proposed a weaker version of self-determination, then we must recognize that there is a sea change in Hong Kong’s political landscape. In total the candidates who ran on the platform of demanding for self-determination garnered 22.2% of the vote (including those who lost the election) – the vote here only means the regional direct election votes; it excludes the functional constituency vote and the super district board vote.

Three Trends

This election exhibits three new trends: politicization, polarization, and the rise of a new generation. These trends explain the results and also impact on future development.

For decades, Hong Kong people have been called “politically apathetic”. In 1995, the partial direct election to the legislature, two years before the return of sovereignty to China, the voter turnout was merely 35.79%. In 1998, in the first election after the reunification with China, the turnout soared. An interesting phenomenon since then, however, is that voter turnout has mirrored the movement of a spring; only the first, third, and fifth elections witnessed a relatively high turnout, while for the second and fourth it was much lower. The results were as follows:

1998 – 53.29%

2000 – 43.57%

2004 – 55.64%

2008 – 45.20%

2012 – 53.05%

2016 – 58.28%

This spring like effect is related to Beijing’s policy over Hong Kong. The high turnout in 1998 reflected an anxiety among the people after returning to Beijing’s rule. The high turnout in 2004 was because in the previous year Beijing had tried to push the Hong Kong government to pass the national security bill, as stipulated in Article 23 of the Basic Law. The attempt was defeated by a mass mobilization, which in turn encouraged a high turnout in the election of the following year. Conversely, when Beijing did not impose a hard line policy in the interim period between two elections, in the next election the turnout tended to drop by 10 percent, as was the case in 2000 and 2008. The 2012 election’s high turnout was a response to the Hong Kong government’s attempt to impose “national education” on students, a program aimed at making young people more patriotic to China and which was again defeated by a mass youth mobilization. It also coincided with the accession to power of Xi Jinping. Since then Beijing’s policy has become

even more hard-lined, which has pushed many young people to embrace a “Hong Kong identity” in defiance of Beijing’s nationalistic and despotic policy. This finally accumulated in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, and after the government crackdown it should not surprise anyone that in the 2016 election we no longer witnessed a spring like effect of contracting after over-stretching; rather what we saw was the highest voter turnout ever, reflecting a period of politicization since 2012.

Despite vote rigging and bribery and a surge in the voter turnout, the pro-Beijing camp suffered a mild decline in their share of the votes, from 42.7% to 40.6%. This shows that sixty percent of the voters continue to resent it, including many first time voters. However, this politicization also involves a polarization of attitudes towards Beijing and more generally towards “Chinese identity”. The electoral victory of the five new hands in politics who demanded self determination has been at the expense of the so called pan-democrat camp, however. Many lost their long time seat, including Lee Cheuk Yan, the leader / head of the both the Labour Party and the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU). The success of these five self determination advocates shows that many voters, especially the new generation, no longer accept the excessively moderate policy of the pan-democrats in their dealing with Beijing.

The birth of two new forces for change

Since the 1980’s when the colonial government first introduced local elections and then in the 1991 partial LegCo election, the political spectrum in Hong Kong has always been based on the dichotomy of “pro-Beijing” and “pro-democracy”, rather than a left and right spectrum. This is just a copy of the liberal’s idea about Hong Kong and China politics, namely everything is seen through the prism of the binary opposition between “state despotism” and “civil society”. Even though there is a small labour party, no one can tell any major differences between this party and the other liberal parties in terms of program. All parties were centre or right wing. Things only began to show signs of change in 2008, and then soon there was a growth of the right wing localists, with some of them evolving into the far right during the Umbrella Movement. This far right force considers anyone who disagrees with them as “fucking leftists”, when in truth there has neither been a publicly visible socialist left nor liberal left in Hong Kong for decades. What the far right did not expect was that their attack has actually helped bring about a new generation of liberal leftists - people who wish to be more assertive in their opposition to Beijing but without yielding to the right wing discourses of racism and xenophobia. The liberal commentators have been unable to understand this phenomenon with their old paradigm. They consider everyone who advocates self-determination or independence as “self-determination localists”, and apply this indiscriminately to all five new comers, without noticing that using the same term for these five legislators blurs the left and right division among them. Some use the term “radical localists” to describe all five of them, but this is equally misleading.

While Yau Wai-ching of Youngspiration and Cheng Chung-tai from Civil Passion are right wing or far right localists, Nathan Law Kwun-chung, who represents Demosisto (Joshua Wong is amongst its founders), Eddie Chu Hoi Dick and Lau Siu Lai are more centre left leaning. In terms of political vision, although the two wings both advocate self-determination, their approach is very different.

The former wing uses a lot of racist and xenophobic language in its opposition not only to the CCP but also to target all Chinese. Youngspiration’s program, for instance, explicitly demands to exclude those who cannot speak either Cantonese or English from citizenship. This is especially ridiculous as many senior Hong Kong indigenous do not speak either languages, but rather only speak Hakka or Chaochou. They also aim to exclude Mainland Chinese immigrants from enjoying basic benefits in Hong Kong. Civic Passion is also well known for inciting violence against Chinese. It is also not accidental that they have little interest in promoting labour rights or social security for marginalized groups and minorities. If these people are radical then they are radically conservative. The right wing localists received 7% of the total vote (this includes all candidates from this camp who ran).

The latter wing’s call for self-determination has not been linked to any anti-Chinese sentiment. Eddie Chu has pointed out that while the former wing is “nationalist self-determinist”, he is for democratic self determination, which includes rather than excludes Chinese and other marginalized groups. Nevertheless, all three of the newly elected from this wing exhibit a lack of clarity in their advocacy for self-determination; it is not clear as to their actual plan and road map. It is still largely a slogan, although Nathan Law is more explicit in calling for a referendum on Hong Kong’s future. Their political vision is, however, wedded to a social platform which includes labour rights, gender rights and minorities’ rights, and is therefore very different from the right wing localists.

One must also add the League of Social Democrats (LSD) to this camp of centre left self-determination advocates. Although its choice of words concerning its political vision is slightly different from the three newly elected centre left young legislators (LSD calls for a democratic re-making of Hong Kong’s Basic Law), its political and social position is close to the latter. Together the centre left camp garnered 15.2% of the vote (including all running candidates).

In this election the LSD struck an alliance with People Power. Previously People Power could never be considered as anything close to left. Its spiritual leader, Stephen Shiu Yeuk Yuen, has been very explicit in fighting against the trade union movement, on the grounds that it interferes with the “free market”. Actually the leaders of the LSD and People Power were once part of the same party, namely the LSD 1.0, as I call it so as to differentiate the LSD first founded in 2006 and the LSD in 2011 when two leaders, Albert Chan Wai-yip and Raymond Wong Yuk-man, left and formed People Power, leaving Leung Kwok-hung, also known as Long Hair, as the only leader of the LSD, or LSD 2.0. The LSD 1.0 was a funny combination from the start. While the long time legislator Albert Chan was never a leftist and in fact was a Democratic Party legislator for many years, Raymond Wong has long been associated with the KMT and the mafia. Long Hair, a former Trotskyist, was a lone figure with a small group of supporters until he co-founded the LSD 1.0 with the other two. With the beginning of a change of mood amongst voters, the three all won in their election campaign in 2008. The 2011 split created People Power, only to split again in 2013, resulting in the resignation of Raymond Wong. By then both the LSD and People Power had evolved into their 2.0 version. The splitting away of the right wing Raymond Wong plus the withdrawal of support from former People Power spiritual leader and funder, Stephen Shiu, has practically meant that People Power has been less right wing since then. Although the LSD 2.0’s ally with People Power 2.0 in this election is less driven by politically correct motives, their joint program exhibits a tendency towards a centre left direction.

Entering a highly fluid period

Of course, the future direction of this new force of “democratic self-determination advocates” is still far from consolidated. One can detect signs of wavering when the right wing localist pressure grows. But one must not lose sight of the fact that this new democratic force has the support of 15.2% of the voters. It is these voters who are fed up with the pan-democrats’ political line of conciliation towards Beijing and who are looking for more radical answers to defend Hong Kong’s autonomy. The reason that trade union leader Lee Cheuk Yan lost his long time seat is precisely because he stuck to his alliance with the liberal’s position of striving for universal suffrage within the restraint of the Basic Law, an effort similar to squaring a circle, and a kind of effort with which 22.2% of voters disagree. The fact that they sent the five relatively radical democrats to the legislature is in practice not only an act to show their resentment against Beijing, it is also simultaneously an act to show their resentment against the pan-democrats without, however, yielding to the further rightward drift initiated by the demagogue right wing localists.

These “democratic left” voters are surely even less consolidated than the legislators they voted for. Many also voted as they did because they are tired of the old faces of the pan-democrats leaders who have toed the same useless line for years. This is especially so among young voters. In general, the failure of these pan-democrats in giving any direction or leadership to the 2014 Umbrella Movement deeply discredited them. Lee Chuek Yan’s political career might have been sealed during the Umbrella Movement when, at the height of the occupation when thousands of

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young people tried to break through police barriers, Lee refused to take a helmet from a young person, symbolizing his disapproval of the civil disobedience action. He did not know that this also symbolized his break with the young generation.

All in all, this election represents how Hong Kong politics is entering into a period of volatility and fluidity after more than 40 years of stability, as well as the shaking up of the old and useless paradigm. It is a time to act, and act fast.

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