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Hong Kong

Defending Hong Kong's Autonomy: A Partial Victory

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The opposition camp's landslide victory in Hong Kong's local district elections, on 24 November, can be considered to be a referendum on both the Hong Kong government and Beijing. The people's voice is a clear and loud "No" against the establishment's hard-line policies.

The opposition usually has around 55-60 percent support in the legislative election, and only around 40 percent in the district elections. The fact that the opposition now garnered 57 per cent of the vote compared to the pro-Beijing parties' 41 per cent is surely a big victory.

It is an even bigger victory in terms of actual seats filled. The pan-democrats won 388 seats in total - an increase of 263 seats from the last round of elections - while pro-Beijing parties lost 240 seats, retaining only 59 seats in total.

The popularity of the pan-democrat camp has already been seen in some polls before the election: 83 percent of the population lay the blame for violence at the government's feet, while only 40 percent thought it was also the protestors' responsibility.

Still, nobody ever thought the pan-democrats could win by such a large margin in the district elections, especially at a point when the radical elements of the movement were beginning to decline.

During the week before the election the police laid siege to the Polytechnic University occupied by the protestors, and despite several dozens of them still refusing to surrender, there was little they or their supporters outside can do. Gradually most of them surrendered and were arrested. Some nevertheless managed to escape.

The electoral victory surely boosts the opposition's morale. It is also encouraging that more than sixty of the newly-elected district council-members went to Polytechnic's entrance today to express solidarity with the protestors still hiding inside and to acknowledge the students' contribution to the movement.

The police finally entered the campus on 28 November but without making any new arrests.

In fact, this is the opposition's second major victory - since the last one that forced Carrie Lam's government to withdraw the anti-extradition bill on 4 September.

With these two major victories, a new kind of activism may emerge in this movement that Hong Kong has not yet seen. By contrast, the Umbrella Movement in 2014 was totally defeated, followed by a long period of demoralisation among the activists. With more than two million people being mobilised, the movement now has an opportunity to learn from its past experiences.

Lastly, there had been at least five attempts to call for a general strike. Only the August 5th general strike was successful, essentially shutting down half of the city. This is the first general strike in decades and demonstrates to labour's power to the people.

There are now young activists who realize the importance of the labour struggle and are calling for joining or forming new unions.

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What is unique about these recent unionizing efforts is that they are radically decentralized, being self-organized by fairly anonymous participants on online platforms like Telegram, rather than face-to-face workplace organizing.

It remains to be seen how consolidated and effective this unionizing drive could become. A young public servant's call to form a new public employee union elicited a very good response: news reported that hundreds of public servants have enlisted.

30 November 2019

PS:

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