

# A summer of discontent

Six months since the protests in Hong Kong began, young Hongkongers are in no mood to negotiate and Beijing refuses to budge. **Ananth Krishnan** reports on the hopes and concerns of a deeply divided city in a country with two seemingly irreconcilable systems

On July 1, the 22nd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China, half a million Hongkongers marched through the streets of the region, calling for democracy. The protest was largely peaceful for much of the day, but by evening it began descending into chaos. Two weeks earlier, on June 16, more than a million Hongkongers had taken to the streets (protest organisers claimed that an astonishing two million people had turned out in a city of seven million residents, while the police claimed it was less than half a million).

Beijing has described this summer's protests as the biggest challenge to its rule since 1997, when the former British colony returned to China. The immediate trigger for the protests, which first began in April, was an ill-conceived extradition bill that would allow Hong Kong to repatriate fugitives to the mainland, Taiwan and Macau, with which it does not have extradition treaties. The move was a response to a case in Taiwan where a Hongkonger was accused of murdering his girlfriend. For many in Hong Kong who worry about a gradual erosion of the 'one country, two systems' model which gives Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy, this was the straw that broke the camel's back, perceived as giving Beijing an entry past the firewall that has insulated the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) for the past 22 years.

By the time evening descended on July 1, the anti-extradition bill protests had snowballed into something larger. The protesters were calling for five demands: besides the complete withdrawal of the bill, they wanted a retraction by the government terming the protests a riot; exoneration of the more than 1,400 people arrested till date since the protests began; an independent inquiry into police actions and the use of excessive force; and, most importantly, universal suffrage and direct elections to choose the Hong Kong Chief Executive and 70 members of the Legislative Council (LegCo).

Under the current system, only half of the 70 LegCo members are chosen directly through geographical constituencies, while the rest are chosen by what are called functional constituencies which generally represent trade and commercial interest groups. Only 1,200 people vote to choose the Chief Executive. They are members of an election committee that is, again, largely dominated by representatives from commercial bodies and other professionals. In short, the system is rigged in favour of the establishment.

### Storming of LegCo

"Five demands, not one less" was the chant on July 1. Having made their point, most of the peaceful demonstrators began to return home, barring a restless crowd that felt unsatisfied. The few hundred or so that remained were all young, most of them dressed in black, their faces masked to protect them from the ever-ubiquitous security cameras that today dot every major world city. By nightfall, this group powered its way past a vastly outnumbered police force right into the heart of Hong Kong's political power, the LegCo complex. The few remaining riot police within the complex fled, leaving the group fully in charge over Hong Kong's seat of power. Storming into the chamber, they defaced the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s national emblem and tore down the portraits of the current and past presidents of LegCo. Portraits of those who had served before 1997, however, were left untouched.

The storming of LegCo brought the Hong Kong protests to world attention, and it was an unprecedented event. From the many images of that night – from the vandalised central chamber to the national emblem covered in black paint – one in particular stood out, a message spray-painted on to a pillar and that went viral. "It was you who taught me," read the message to Hong Kong's leaders, "that peaceful marches are useless."

### The 'I' word

A few weeks after the storming of LegCo, I sat across the table from the young black-clad man who wrote that message. By the time I met Levi, as he wished to be called, the protests had carried on for more than 10 straight weekends – this weekend, when massive protests are planned ahead of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC on October 1, will be the 16th – and the several thousand "radicals" had become the global face of the protests with their distinctive appearance – all clad in black, faces covered with tear gas masks, and donning yellow helmets. Every weekend, they fought with the police, dodging tear gas and rubber bullets and hurling Molotov cocktails in response. They trashed the metro stations of Hong Kong's famous Mass Transit Railway, blockaded roads, and lit fires on the streets.

Levi hardly seemed like the Molotov-cocktail pipe-wielding black Ninjas I saw



Hundreds of protesters stormed the Legislative Council in Hong Kong on July 1, 2019, the 22nd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China. (Below): Anti-government protests in Hong Kong in August. • GETTY IMAGES



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MARTIN LEE  
Hong Kong politician

on television. Soft-spoken, he is in his early 20s. Born to underprivileged parents, he worked hard through high school and thanks to good grades, made it into one of Hong Kong's most prestigious universities. A promising career awaits, should he choose to pursue one, but he appeared uninterested in his career prospects. He said he has one thing on his mind right now: "Fighting for Hong Kong". Levi was among the first groups which had suggested, on July 1, to storm LegCo. "We had protested peacefully so many times," he told me. "And it got us absolutely nothing in our fight. So we decided we needed to do something different." I asked Levi what exactly he was fighting for. The answer came back immediately: "Hong Kong's independence."

Since 1997, even many of China's fiercest critics in Hong Kong and the pan-democratic parties never uttered the 'I' word, only calling for universal suffrage and rights under the Basic Law to be guaranteed. For the young protesters, however, their current slogan is "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times!" Levi said, "In my opinion and for most of the young protesters I know, liberate means one thing only: independence." Independence, in reality, is a complete non-starter. But that even a minority – and an overwhelmingly young one at that – is now uttering the 'I' word should alarm Beijing and the SAR government.

How did it come to this? The general feeling in Hong Kong is that for the first 10 years after the 1997 handover, the 'one country, two systems' model worked far better than most expected. The Basic Law guarantees most democratic rights to Hongkongers that were denied in the mainland, such as a free press and the right to protest. Article 2 of the law gives Hong Kong "a high degree of autonomy" and "executive, legislative and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication". Article 5 states that the "socialist system and policies" of the PRC shall not be practised and that "the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years".

There are, however, firm limits, starting with Article 1, which says Hong Kong is "an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China". The territory's external affairs and defence are handled by Beijing, which stations a People's Liberation Army garrison on the island. Article 23 says the SAR "shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government". This

hasn't yet been enacted into law, but the passing of a national security legislation is a particular source of concern for many in Hong Kong, given the ambiguity of what constitutes sedition or subversion in the PRC.

### A model under strain

This summer's protests – and the now-withdrawn extradition bill – are the clearest signs yet that the model is coming under increasing stress. Martin Lee is the most well-known pro-democracy Hong Kong politician. A barrister by training, Lee, 81, helped draft the Basic Law in the early 1980s. Lee told me that the fundamental reason for the recent events is "because Beijing has changed its basic policies regarding Hong Kong". "Now," he said, "they have changed the whole concept of 'one country, two systems', [moving away] from trusting the Hong Kong people, allowing us to be masters of our house and enjoying a high degree of autonomy which they promised to give us in the Sino-British Joint Declaration." The extradition bill would have, in Lee's opinion, "demolished the firewall and opened the door". It isn't, however, just about the bill. "The Basic Law says the ultimate aim is to have universal suffrage, but not in the first 10 years from 1997. The idea was during that period, Hong Kong must develop gradually towards that ultimate goal. Now we are in the 23rd year. Where is that goal today?"

That's not how Hong Kong's pro-Beijing politicians see it. Choy So Yuk is Hong Kong's representative to the National People's Congress (NPC), which is Beijing's parliament, and from the pro-Beijing DAB party (Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong). She told me that if democrats like Lee hadn't stood in the way, "there would be universal suffrage today". She said Lee and the pan-democrats hurt their cause by rejecting Beijing's offer for universal suffrage. Choy was referring to the NPC's 2014 decision to allow direct elections, but with a catch – all candidates would first have to be approved by more than half of the pro-establishment-dominated nominating committee. It was this decision, rejected as fake democracy by many young Hongkongers, that led to the 2014 Occupy Central and Umbrella Movement, which turned out to be the political awakening for many young Hongkongers, including Levi.

### Shrinking middle ground

Choy drew a distinction between "protesters" – "maybe 700,000 or a million, and their concerns we certainly have to address" – and "rioters", who she said are in the few thousands (including,

presumably, Levi). "The first priority is to stop rioters. Until their violence stops, it is difficult to take things forward. The problem is a substantial number of people support the rioters. And they have succeeded in dividing society, families, couples, close friends, into Yellow (pro-democracy) and Blue (pro-Beijing). I listen to these stories from people I knew as a district councillor. One man told me he's stopped talking to his daughter. A second says his sons are now fighting, one Yellow and one Blue. A third said his entire company staff of 130 people went to protest. We are completely divided."

With two camps veering to extremes, the space for the middle is vanishing, said Christine Loh, a former LegCo member and under-secretary for the environment in the previous government. She told me both sides need to re-examine their positions. "The key point is that Hong Kong people need to reconcile that Hong Kong is a part of China and make 'one country, two systems' work even better. The Chief Executive and her ministerial team have to come out and show that they are governing Hong Kong. They have been in the bunker but it's time to come out. They need much better communication with the public, but it seems this is an area where the government is seriously deficient. We need new Hong Kong leadership to be more effective in communicating with Beijing that Hong Kong's liberal soul needs nurturing too, but it is not 'anti-China'. The government needs to respond to policy concerns, such as housing; and it cannot avoid people's desire for electoral reform."

### Economic concerns

Hong Kong's economic problems are not driving the protests – and throwing money will not fix the political aspirations of the youth. Indeed, I barely heard any mention of economic issues in conversations with dozens of young protesters, many of whom come from middle-class families. But problems, especially housing, are feeding into the perception of a system that doesn't work for its people, said economist Richard Wong at Hong Kong University. He drew a contrast with Singapore, where 90% of residents own homes, many through a public housing programme, compared with half in Hong Kong. Singapore's public housing programme, Wong said, offers lessons. In Hong Kong, one-third of housing is rented and subsidised, one-sixth is ownership subsidised, and half is entirely private, in a territory where private real estate developers have historically enjoyed enormous influence and power. Ownership would solve many of the



problems, Wong said, suggesting all public rental housing should be sold at a discount, following the Singapore model, with a waiver of all debt.

Then there are broader economic concerns about the city's future – and the question of its declining importance to the mainland. Nearby Shenzhen's GDP surpassed Hong Kong's for the first time in 2018, leaving some to wonder if Shenzhen and Shanghai could replace Hong Kong. That isn't going to happen, argued economist Chen Zhiwu, and the reason is 'one country, two systems'. "Why is Hong Kong so important? Domestic and foreign investors believe that Hong Kong's judicial procedures are fair, so all parties can accept Hong Kong as a dispute arbitration place when signing contracts and trade contracts," he said. He pointed out that in 2018, 75% of China's \$120 billion FDI entered through Hong Kong.

Chen believes Hong Kong's historical role in China's opening up won't change. "People often ask me, why did the Chinese economy grow so fast after 1978, especially after the '90s, but India's didn't? I reply, that's because India does not have a Hong Kong. In 1980, India's per capita GDP was almost twice of China's. By 1991, it was flat, and today

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CHRISTINE LOH  
Former Legislative Council member

it's about half of China's. India suffers from not having a free economy and free port like Hong Kong to facilitate its economy. China is so fortunate to have this bridge to the world," he said. A bridge not just for financial capital, but human capital that attracted many Chinese to return from the U.S.

### What's next?

That is why Beijing is not likely to intervene – at least if the violence remains limited, as it presently is. Hong Kong officials say that despite Chinese state propaganda showing alarming images of a build-up of armed police in nearby Shenzhen, Beijing had in fact made it very clear that this was a mess of the SAR government's making, and it was for them to clean up. As long as the SAR government felt the situation remained under control, Beijing had no appetite to intervene with force, which would have been disastrous. As much as the weekend protests continue to roil the city, the protests remain largely well organised and targeted and haven't spiralled out of control – yet. There have been no deaths, and a fatality would mean all bets are off. After every Sunday evening's chaos, the city miraculously returns to its avatar as a financial centre on Monday mornings, the suits replacing the black shirts on the streets in a way that perhaps only Hong Kong can.

Where does Hong Kong go from here? Lee said he sees two possibilities. Beijing may want to "squeeze Hong Kong and turn it into a Macau". It would wait out the protests, allow the anger to dissipate, continue gradually pushing the limits of 'two systems', all while not crossing a line that would hurt its finan-

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GLORIA  
Hongkonger

cial prospects. This, he said, will meet resistance. "I am hoping it will be another way – they wake up and say, if I want this goose to lay golden eggs, I cannot kill it. Universal suffrage is the only way of resolving the contraction of having a Chief Executive who is, under the Basic Law, answerable to Hong Kong and Beijing. How is that possible though, when she is not chosen by Hong Kong people?"

I asked him, even if Beijing's worst-case scenario candidate was elected – "You mean someone like me?" he joked – wouldn't their power in any case be restrained by Article 1? "The Basic Law is clear and Beijing has nothing to worry about," he said. "But their answer is simple. They want 100% control."

It is that perception that's driving young Hongkongers like Gloria, 20, to the streets every weekend. Gloria was born in the mainland and moved to Hong Kong to finish high school. It was her schooling that entirely changed her notions of democracy and the role of a citizen, she said. "I've spent most of my life in the mainland, but if you ask me, I am a Hongkonger first," she told me. "You don't know what freedom is until you feel it. Once you do, you cannot go back." Speaking Cantonese, she said, made her feel accepted in a way that many mainland immigrants who feel discriminated against in Hong Kong do not.

### Fear of losing everything

Gloria described herself as a person who scares very easily, but she now finds herself in a situation where she is not only facing up to police and tear gas every Sunday, but in a strange sense, is happy to do so. "Being there for me is the highest form of happiness I have ever experienced," she told me. "This sense of unity. It is different from the small forms of happiness you get from daily life. That's individual happiness. But the sense of linking together and becoming something larger... I felt it deeply and cannot forget it. You don't know the name of the person who is standing next to you on the street, but you know we are friends, just by being there, by sharing the same values." Gloria said she wholeheartedly supports the "frontline" like Levi and understands why they have taken to violence. "Our freedom is eroding. We need to protect our home," she said. "I feel those frontline protesters are fighting for me. They bear the consequences, they risk losing everything."

There is no question that the sentiment that's driving young Hongkongers is deep and pervasive, and isn't likely going anywhere. But what the protests will achieve is more difficult to answer. I asked Levi where he thinks the protests will end up. He conceded they could well gather momentum after October 1. But he is convinced that the sentiments he is fighting for will not go away, and that is a worthwhile cause in itself.

The protesters see their leaderless movement as a strength. Leaders can be arrested or detained. Levi was critical of most of Hong Kong's politicians, including pro-democracy leaders such as Lee or Joshua Wong, who emerged as the face of the Umbrella Movement. "They have been giving us false hopes on 'one country, two systems'," he told me. The only political figures that appeal are the most radical ones, such as Edward Leung of Hong Kong Indigenous, a pro-independence and anti-immigrant party. Levi said the idea of being leaderless is that no one can negotiate on their behalf, so there is no chance for compromise. "It is a compromise that got us here in the first place," he said.

Journalists like easy narratives: black versus white, David versus Goliath, Yellow versus Blue. But assessing where the protests will end is far from easy. Could the protests end up, in some sense, undermining what they set out to achieve?

The protesters see compromise as anathema to what they stand for. Beijing is in no mood to compromise either. If anything, the more radical the protests get, the more likely Beijing will harden its stand, especially as there appears little sympathy (and increasingly, little to no information) in the mainland. Could the protests subside? They certainly could. Will the sentiments behind them dissipate? That's harder to answer. So, the stalemate endures: one party in Beijing in no mood to budge, one movement in Hong Kong in no mood to settle, one country with two systems that appear increasingly irreconcilable, and one city, deeply divided.

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