

Extraordinary rendition

Hundreds of thousands took to the streets - China seems deaf to mass protests in Hong Kong over extradition

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A planned law to send alleged criminals to China sparks one of the largest demonstrations since 1997.

IT IS COMMONLY said in Hong Kong that many of its 7m people have been suffering from “protest fatigue” since the failure of weeks of demonstrations and sit-ins in 2014 to persuade the government to grant the Chinese territory greater democracy. In the past week there has been clear evidence that this diagnosis is wrong. First, on June 4th, came the biggest turnout in years for the territory’s annual candle-lit vigil commemorating the crushing of the Tiananmen Square unrest thirty years ago. About 180,000 people took part, organisers said. Then, on June 9th, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in protest against a proposed law that would allow criminal suspects to be extradited to mainland China, where courts are controlled by the Communist Party. It may have been the biggest demonstration since Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997.

Opposition to the extradition bill has been widespread, even drawing in businesspeople who normally support the government. Several senior judges have expressed concern about it. On June 6th hundreds of lawyers staged a rare protest against the legislation. Among those who took part in the massive protest three days later were political parties, student groups and church congregations. Many demonstrators wore white, a symbol of mourning. Some wore yellow, the colour adopted by the protesters in 2014. For hours they filled the streets of central Hong Kong, shouting slogans against the “evil law” and calling on the territory’s chief executive, Carrie Lam, to step down.

The demonstration was largely peaceful. But at 11pm the government issued a statement saying it would press ahead with its plans for getting the bill adopted by the Legislative Council, known as Legco (it is hoping that it will be passed before legislators begin their summer vacation in July). Seemingly in response, some of the hundreds of protesters who had gathered outside the government’s headquarters tried to force their way in. Police armed with pepper spray and batons moved in to disperse them. Several people were injured, including three police officers.

The governments in Hong Kong and Beijing say the bill will close a “loophole” which makes it impossible to send suspects to “other parts of China”. But many people fear the legislation could be abused. Even though the proposed law would not apply to people accused of political crimes, critics of the bill say China’s judiciary could secure the extradition of such people by charging them with other offences. They also say that China’s courts are so prone to political interference, and so opaque, that no suspect can be guaranteed a fair trial. The bill would apply to anyone physically in Hong Kong, including a banker on a business trip or a journalist in transit through the airport. That

worries many people beyond Hong Kong itself.

The government says that it has been taking account of such criticisms. It has modified the bill to reduce the number of economic crimes to which it would apply, and to make it cover only more severe offences. It has clarified that it would not consider extradition requests from China's provincial courts. They would need to be made by the country's supreme court. Officials in Hong Kong say the bill would comply with Hong Kong's human-rights standards. Some Hong Kongers are persuaded by this. A group supporting the bill says it has gathered more than 800,000 signatures.

After the demonstration, Mrs Lam denied that she was introducing the legislation at the request of the central government. Officials in Hong Kong say there is a practical reason for getting it passed now. Under the current law, a Hong Kong man who stands accused of murdering his girlfriend in Taiwan cannot be sent back there for trial. But Taiwan says it will not ask for the suspect's extradition under the new law. That is because the bill refers to Taiwan as part of China's territory, which the island does not accept.

The scale of the protest will put Mrs Lam under considerable political pressure. In 2003 about half a million people took to the streets to protests against an anti-subversion bill which they feared would be used to crush dissent. The protest resulted in the shelving of the legislation and the eventual resignation of the then chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa. In 2014 student-led protests led to the watering down of a plan to introduce a curriculum that would whitewash the Communist Party's record.

But not all pressure yields results. The weeks-long protests and sit-ins later that year, known as the "Umbrella Movement", resulted in no concessions. After the demonstration on June 9th Mrs Lam repeated her support for the bill. She is also likely to take her cue from officials in Beijing, who have expressed strong support for the legislation. In response to the demonstration, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said the central government would continue to "firmly support" the administration in Hong Kong, and warned against "outside interference". *China Daily*, a state-owned newspaper, accused "foreign forces" of aiming to "hurt China by trying to create havoc in Hong Kong." Such statements do not suggest that the mood in Beijing is conciliatory.

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