

INTERVIEW

Past, present, future - Everything You Need to Know About the Hong Kong Protests

Wednesday 19 June 2019, by [Alexa \(Hong Kong\)](#), [AU Loong-yu](#), [CHAN Chris King-Chi](#), [LEE Chun-Wing](#), [LEUNG Lam Chi](#), [LIN Kevin](#), [SLAC](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2019).

Hong Kong's government tried to rush through a bill that would limit civil liberties. Instead they triggered a tidal wave of protests — some of the largest in modern history.

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On June 9, Hong Kong was convulsed by a million-strong march against a proposed amendment that would allow suspects to be extradited from the former British colony to mainland China, along with other countries. The government — chaired by the Beijing-approved chief executive Carrie Lam — insists that political dissidents and activists would be unaffected by the amendment. But the measure set off a firestorm, igniting public anger even as the government rushed to push it through the Legislative Council by July.

Last Friday, following days of protests and clashes with the police, and amid growing calls for political strikes, Lam tabled the amendment. And on Saturday, hours into another massive demonstration — said to number over two million out of a population of seven million, with protesters demanding the amendment's complete withdrawal and Lam's resignation — the Hong Kong government issued an apology.

Why has the amendment aroused such indignation? How did the legacy of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong's last major wave of demonstrations, shape the current protests? What are the politics of the protesters? And what are the prospects for democratic movements in Hong Kong and China going forward?

To shed light on all of these questions and more, *Jacobin* contributor Kevin Lin talked to a range of activists and scholars: Chris Chan, a sociologist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a student and labor activist; Lam Chi Leung, a socialist in Hong Kong and a member of Left21; Chun-Wing Lee, a socialist, member of Left 21, and editor of *The Owl* [[1](#)], a left-wing website in Hong Kong; and Au Loong Yu, a writer and activist. Lin also solicited comments from Alexa, a Hong Kong-based activist, and the Student Labour Action Coalition, a distinctly left-wing group in a place with few of them. The interview has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.

The Protests

Kevin Lin - KL

What is the significance of the extradition amendment? Why has it garnered so much opposition in Hong Kong?

Au Loong Yu - ALY

Hong Kong has extradition agreements with twenty countries, including the UK and the US, but not with mainland China. The pro-Beijing camp, here in Hong Kong and overseas, argues that since Hong Kong has extradition agreements with the West, why can't it have an agreement with mainland China?

Under the "one country, two systems" arrangement [2], Article 8 of the Basic Law stipulates that "the laws previously in force in Hong Kong . . . shall be maintained," which means that Hong Kong is insulated from China's legal system. Hong Kong, as a special region of China, does not have the necessary power and strength to resist the Chinese central government's legal persecution if Hong Kong's legal system is not insulated. China is not only disdainful of basic due process but also of judicial independence. An extradition agreement between China and Hong Kong necessarily undermines "one country, two systems."

Lam Chi Leung (LCL)

The amendment to the Extradition Law touched the nerve of most Hong Kong citizens. Under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), citizens often do not have due process, resulting regularly in wrongful convictions.

Those who have criticized the CCP, those who organize the Tiananmen vigil each year in Hong Kong, those who have helped Chinese dissidents, or even those Hong Kong activists who have supported labor and other rights organizations in mainland China could be considered "endangering national security" and extradited to mainland China. Ordinary citizens are concerned that Hong Kong will be like any other mainland Chinese city, where the freedom of citizens could be at risk.

ALY

Hong Kong people have the bitter memory of the Bookshop Five incident. Between October and December 2015, five owners and staff from Causeway Bay Books went missing. They were believed to have been arrested for publishing books about the private life of Chinese president Xi Jinping.

What is alarming is not only that this violates the "one country, two systems" principle, but also that two of the arrests were extrajudicial arrests. Two of the booksellers, Gui Minhai and Lee Bo, were abducted by Chinese agents in Thailand and Hong Kong, respectively. If China's legal system improved significantly then it would be possible to discuss an extradition agreement with China. But in reality it has gone from bad to worse.

Chun-Wing Lee (CWL)

The turnout has been so large [3] because even those who can be considered allies of the Hong Kong government do not support the amendment bill. Since 1997, when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule, the Chinese government has been ruling Hong Kong by forging an alliance with the big capitalists and the middle class in Hong Kong. This strategy is understandable because they, as the major beneficiaries of Hong Kong's capitalist development, are inclined to support the status quo.

But throughout these twenty-two years, the younger middle class, especially professionals, has become quite discontented with the government. While the fear that the relatively liberal lifestyle in Hong Kong is under threat is a major reason, it is undeniable that rising living costs, especially

housing [4], is another factor.

Since 2003, the Chinese government has tried to stabilize this alliance by increasing asset values in Hong Kong. Capital from mainland China is one of the causes of the growth of the property market and the stock market. But this governing strategy has clearly backfired, as it has become increasingly difficult for young people to purchase their own homes. The young middle class and students have become the cornerstone of the opposition forces in Hong Kong.

KL

Alexa, you've been at the demonstrations. Can you describe what you have seen? Who are the protesters, and how are the protests organized?

Alexa (A)

The protesters are people from all walks of life, high in spirit and hopeful. There are no longer just young students.

While there are no [formal] leaders in the protests, people have self-organized, mainly through Facebook, Telegram groups, and lihkg [an online forum like reddit]. They are super creative, making memes mimicking the pro-Beijing propaganda to appeal to the older generation in Hong Kong for support. They have created "meditation" and "picnic" events on Facebook to call on people to gather at Tamar Park [5]. Some people also established a page to call people to go to the MTR [Hong Kong's metro system] for actions too.

At the scene of the mass protests, people are organized, and they know what resources they need. I think all these were learnt from the Umbrella Movement in 2014 [6]. The high level of civic participation and the concerns for Hong Kong's development, human rights, and rule of law are at the highest point since 1997.

It is also the first time in my life seeing people, who have been mostly silent, express anger towards the government. They are disgusted by what the police force has done to peaceful protesters. The police force has obviously violated the United Nations conventions in its use of excessive force.

KL

While the Civil Human Rights Front (a coalition of civil society organizations) formally called for the June 9 demonstration, the current movement, as Alexa noted, appears to be horizontal and leaderless. What are your thoughts on this aspect of the protests?

ALY

While the 2014 Umbrella Movement was largely spontaneous [7], the HKFS ("Hong Kong Federation of Students") was still instrumental in making that happen. The student organizations are now much smaller and very fragmented. Political parties, willingly or unwillingly, have also been marginalized in the mobilization.

The Civil Human Rights Front was instrumental in making the June 9 and the June 12 actions happen by getting the licenses to march and assemble in the first place. But it simply does not have the organizational capacity to lead massive civil disobedience.

In this 2019 movement, we are witnessing the continuation of a trend already very visible in 2014 — namely, the strong feeling in favor of decentralized and leaderless actions. The communication revolution makes coordination much easier now and rigid organization less necessary.

Yet there is a kind of fetishism of spontaneity among young activists. Many simply see organization as superfluous or necessarily authoritarian. Even the relatively new Demosistō, founded and led by

Joshua Wong [8] [*a twenty-two-year-old activist who came to prominence during the Umbrella Revolution*], seems not to be attractive enough to the current youngsters.

Today anyone can be a temporary leader and call for radical actions without weighing the pros and cons. For instance, on June 11, certain small pro-independence localists called for “proportional violence against the government” and for people to break into the legislature and the government headquarters the next day to block the amendment bill from being introduced. Eventually hundreds of youngsters did try to break into the legislature on June 12, despite the fact that by then the legislature hall was empty, as there was no meeting at all. This was also the moment when the police began to fire rubber bullets, causing injuries.

Leaderless struggles, however great, are also less able to have careful deliberation before taking drastic actions, let alone able to fight against provocateurs and agents from both the Hong Kong and the Beijing governments. That said, one must also recognize that the controversial attempt to break into the legislature was, for the first time in decades, positively received by many in Hong Kong.

KL

Despite the weakening of university student associations, other new groups have emerged. One of the more radical left groups, the Student Labour Action Coalition, seeks to link up student and workers’ movements and has taken direct actions. Would you tell us about your coalition, and how you have participated in the protest movement?

Student Labour Action Coalition (SLAC)

We are a coalition of concerned labor and social groups and unions founded in 2017. We believe that worker and student movements cannot be separated, and we focus on improving workers’ conditions at universities by linking up students and workers.

We have been supporting the protest movement by taking direct action. On June 8, we joined with the Hong Kong Federation of Social Work Students to march on the street to rally Hong Kong citizens to participate in the demonstration the next day. We participated in the demonstration with college students on June 9.

After the march, we joined the picket line and mobilized support for strike actions planned for June 12, and surrounded the Legislative Council. Because the Legislative Council is not democratic and most members are puppets of the Beijing government, we needed to surround the Legislative Council to stop the meetings.

KL

There are often accusations of foreign powers instigating Hong Kong’s social movements, whether it’s the Umbrella Movement or the current protests. What is your response to such accusations?

ALY

The Beijing and Hong Kong governments have said that the protests are funded by the American NED [*National Endowment for Democracy*].

It is true that most pan-democrat [*pro-democracy*] parties have received funding from the NED. But it is also undeniable that both the big protests and clashes on June 9 and 12 were not called by these parties. The Civil Human Rights Front is a coalition of more than fifty organizations, most of which are civil associations and trade unions. The main pan-democrat parties are part of it, but only constitute a minority.

The Front was founded in 2002, in a moment when the main pan-democrat parties were afraid to take the lead in mobilizing people. Precisely because of this history, the main pan-democrats have not been dominant within the Front.

Not to mention the fact that the Front possesses no authority over the people who come to their rally. Often the young people just do what they want upon joining.

Hong Kong Since the Umbrella Movement

KL

Many compare the current demonstrations with the Umbrella Movement, in which tens of thousands of people occupied key roads for seventy-nine days to protest the Chinese government's refusal to allow universal suffrage in Hong Kong's chief executive election. Five years later, what is your assessment of the Umbrella Movement?

CWL

The Umbrella Movement is a very complex story. Before 2014, the leaders of the opposition forces (the so-called pan-democrats) in elections were liberals. On the streets, social movement leaders could be understood as people embracing center-left policies.

To simplify an extremely complex story, the emergence of a huge number of "new" social movement participants overwhelmed the organizational capacity of the established political parties and social movement organizations/networks. From the perspective of many new and young protest participants, the established figures and organizations lacked legitimacy. Many of them therefore embraced what we call "localism" and/or oppose the idea that collective action should be led or coordinated by organizations.

The rise of localism and the distrust of organizations, from my point of view, are the major negative consequences of the Umbrella Movement. But the experience of confronting the police in the streets in 2014 clearly empowered many activists, and more people have become receptive to radical actions in the streets. Without such a change, which is partly a legacy of the Umbrella Movement, the protesters probably would not have been able to occupy the areas outside the Legislative Council, forcing the cancellation of the Legislative Council Meeting.

ALY

Soon after the end of the Umbrella Movement a wave of demoralization swept through the young people, even though it was they who had made the occupation possible. Most loose organizations set up by young people in the previous years crumbled. The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) was attacked and then taken over by xenophobic localists, only to be dismantled later. And then the government started to take revenge and began putting a lot of activists in jail, which further exacerbated the demoralization.

Thanks to the Hong Kong government, a new round of resistance has been reignited, this time by an even younger generation. For a week, even middle school students mobilized in the hundreds to oppose the extradition bill.

The Umbrella generation represents a rupture with the older generation in terms of cultural identity: they are now more likely to identify themselves as Hong Kongers than Chinese, and behind this is the emotional link to Hong Kong which the older generation lacks. What makes the Umbrella generation special is that they began to develop such commitments and were politicized when their demand for universal suffrage was refused by the government. This year the China extradition bill

further politicized an even younger generation.

I remember on the last day of the Umbrella Movement, people hung out a huge banner which read: "We will be back." This prophecy came true.

KL

As Au Loong Yu notes, since the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong has seen a new generation of young activists and leaders emerge. Who is in this new generation of young leaders, and what are their political demands and strategies?

ALY

The pan-democrat parties were discredited for their timid attitude during the Umbrella Movement. The political vacuum was soon filled by two new forces, namely those who are for self-determination and those for independence. They mostly consist of young people.

The 2016 legislative election [9] saw the electoral victory of five new hands in politics from the above two currents, at the expense of the pan-democrat camp, including Lee Cheuk Yan, the leader of both the Labour Party and Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions. The success of the latter two currents shows that many voters, especially the new generation, no longer accept the excessively moderate policy of the pan-democrats in their dealing with Beijing.

While Yau Wai-ching of Youngspiration and Cheng Chung-tai from Civil Passion are either right wing or far-right localists, Eddie Chu Hoi Dick, Lau Siu Lai, and Nathan Law Kwun-chung (representing Demosisto) are slightly left leaning. The former wing uses a lot of racist and xenophobic language, not just against the CCP but against all Chinese people. Youngspiration's program explicitly demands those who cannot speak either Cantonese or English be excluded from citizenship. (This is especially ridiculous, as many senior Hong Kong residents cannot speak either of the two languages but rather speak Hakka or Chaochou dialects.) They also aim at excluding mainland Chinese immigrants from enjoying basic benefits in Hong Kong. Civic Passion is well known for inciting violence against Chinese people. It is no accident that they have little interest in promoting labor rights and social security for marginalized groups and minorities. If these people are radical, they are radically conservative.

The latter wing's call for self-determination has not been linked to any anti-Chinese sentiment. Eddie Chu claims that he is for democratic self-determination, which includes rather than excludes Chinese people and other marginalized groups. Their political vision is wedded to a social platform which includes labor rights, gender rights, and the rights of minorities. The politics of these self-determination advocates are not always so clear cut, however, and may bend towards the localists when pressed hard by the latter. One must also add the League of Social Democrats to this camp of center-left self-determination advocates. Together the center-left camp garnered 15.2 percent of the vote in 2016.

Lam Chi Leung (LCL)

Since the Umbrella Movement, the laissez-faire capitalism of Hong Kong has further increased poverty and economic inequality. One in five Hong Kong citizens, or 1.38 million, live under the poverty line. Its Gini coefficient of 0.539 is higher than that of the US and Singapore.

Hong Kong desperately needs a socialist force that opposes both authoritarianism and capitalism. But individuals and networks in Hong Kong who hold socialist views, such as Left21 and a few revolutionary socialist networks, are very weak, and have become more marginalized against the wave of localist sentiments.

KL

Social movement activists in Hong Kong have played a crucial role in supporting mainland Chinese activists in recent decades, at least partially motivated by the idea that Hong Kong's democratic future will depend on the democratic development of mainland China. Can you talk about the ways in which Hong Kong activists have supported activists in China, and whether the political developments in Hong Kong will undermine this support?

LCL

Since the 1990s, Hong Kong activists have consistently supported labor, human rights, gender rights, LGBT rights, and environmental activists in China and contributed to the development of Chinese social movements and civil society.

The civil freedom of Hong Kong enables it to spread knowledge and literature of social movements to China, promote intellectual exchanges among mainland Chinese and Hong Kong activists, and organize solidarity for social resistance in mainland China. Many books that could only be published in Hong Kong have been brought to mainland China, including writings by mainland Chinese authors, while discussions about social movements have also been carried out in Hong Kong.

With the Chinese government's growing political control over Hong Kong, this role is likely to be diminished. As China's social contradictions intensify, the Chinese government will be even more on guard about Hong Kong's influence on Chinese social movements.

CWL

One of the problems brought about by the rise of localism is that among the young activists in Hong Kong, supporting activism in mainland China may no longer be seen as necessary. The extreme faction of the localist camp even argues that offering support to the democratic movement in mainland China is a waste of time since "Hongkongers" should care about the problems in Hong Kong first.

Another worrying development is that, in mainland China, the official media portray a picture that most, if not all, activists in Hong Kong favor Hong Kong's independence or look down on the mainland Chinese. Although it is impossible to know what the public genuinely thinks in mainland China, what we have been seeing on social media nowadays is that struggles in Hong Kong are winning little sympathy among the netzines in mainland China. Since the suppression in mainland China has become more severe, communications and discussions between Hong Kong-based and mainland-based activities are becoming more difficult.

The Future

KL

What do you make of Hong Kong's chief executive shelving the extradition bill? To what extent is it a victory?

ALY

Carrie Lam only suspended the bill — she didn't withdraw the bill, as demanded by the protestors. It is not a full victory, but is still a partial victory. Temporarily suspending the bill is already a big defeat for Carrie Lam, and this also gives the opposition more time to build up the movement. And since she added that there is no timetable to reintroduce the bill, the length of the suspension will not be short.

What is more, this year and next year are both election years, so it is improbable that she will allow

the pro-Beijing parties to risk losing election by reintroducing the bill during these two years. And the third year is also not ideal because it is the last year of her term. The task of reintroducing the bill, if it happens, will likely be that of the next chief executive.

KL

What, then, is the future of Hong Kong and movements for democracy and economic justice?

Chris Chan (CC)

From the Umbrella Movement to the Anti-Extradition protests, people increasingly accept militant actions because they recognize that demonstrations and occupations cannot disrupt capitalist production. One outcome is important to the Left: after these two movements, people see the importance of strikes and the role of trade unions in political struggles.

During the Umbrella Movement, only some student leaders called on trade unions to strike. But during the anti-Extradition movement, thousands of workers asked their unions to organize strikes. The political struggles will continue in Hong Kong. If the young generation could engage in workplace actions, it would be very significant for the Left.

ALY

The rise of the above-mentioned, two new currents of young people, plus the not-so-young League of Social Democrats, were dealt a big blow when government disqualified their lawmakers [10] [in 2017]. Luckily, another new generation is now rising, and it is taking matters into its own hands. The street mobilization against the China extradition bill is chiefly their work. However if they cannot develop their politics in a democratic left direction, and overcome their fragmentation, they may not be able to consolidate into a strong progressive force.

Secondly, the emphasis on media-oriented actions, a legacy of the pan-democrats, still largely dominates among the young activists, to the extent that not only are long-term organizational efforts often neglected, but also there is an indifference toward the dire situation of working people. Many people are now calling for workers to go on strike, but this has not been successful. They simply treat workers as a kind of instant noodle — all you need is to make an order for it and the waiter will deliver it right away.

Hong Kong's historical trajectory makes it a city hostile toward leftist values of solidarity, fraternity, and equality. A Social Darwinian culture, the result of being a free port for over 150 years, has penetrated the population so much so that it is hard for left forces to grow. To make that happen, young activists will have to begin to address the class issue.

LCL

Looking ahead, the political environment in Hong Kong will become more challenging. The relatively liberal period between 1997 and 2008 has come to an end. The Hong Kong government will handle democratic and social movements more harshly, especially those that insist on direct actions outside of the Legislative Council.

The Hong Kong government sides with the capitalist class and conservative forces, who are always hostile to labor rights, the rights of women, and LGBT rights as well as equitable wealth distribution. The Hong Kong public is under the dual oppression of Chinese bureaucratic capital and Hong Kong's monopoly capital. Any social and economic reform has to confront the reality of authoritarian capitalism.

However, after the anti-WTO protest in 2005 [11], the construction workers' strike in 2007 [12], and

dock workers' strike in 2013 [13], more activists have moved away from the fragmented models of struggle popular in the 1990s, and recognized the class politics necessary for challenging neoliberalism. To develop this left politics, we need to deepen the discussion around questions like "what is left politics" and "what is to be done," clarifying the differences between the socialist left and far-right localism and nationalism.

We also need a broad China perspective and to increase exchanges with social movements and left activists in mainland China. Only through more collaboration with Chinese civil society and social movements that confront China's authoritarian capitalism can the Hong Kong public secure true democracy and social equality.

P.S.

- Jacobin, 06.18.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/06/hong-kong-extradition-bill-protest-movement>

- ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kevin Lin is a labor activist and researcher on China.

Footnotes

[1] <http://theowl.hk>

[2] <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0009.xml>

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=484427115661165>

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