

Hong Kong's Electoral Farce Also Shames the Media

Monday 2 April 2007, by [Correspondent\(s\)](#) (Date first published: 25 March 2007).

Donald Tsang wins "reelection" as Chief Executive while the Hong Kong media quietly practices self-censorship.

Our Correspondent,

Never before has there been a better visual illustration of Hong Kong's electoral system for the chief executive.

While Beijing's man, Donald Tsang, basked in glory at a supporters' rally inside a walled-off, locked up sports ground on Friday evening, protesters outside struggled to have their voices heard, wedging their loudspeakers in the chinks and holes in the wall in vain to broadcast their miseries to Tsang.

And rarely has there been a better visual illustration of the establishment's horror at the hint of dissenting voices as workers from the pro-Beijing parties that helped put on the event tried to muffle the sounds of protest by literally boarding up the holes. Dissent was being squeezed out. And given the local establishment's delusion that "bad news is bad for Hong Kong", the rally staff reflexively reacted at one stage and even tried to prevent the reporters inside from observing the protest outside.

As Tsang told his audience how touched he was to see how much he was adored by the public ahead of Sunday's, uh, well not exactly election, during "community visits" for his campaign, the fifty or so protesters outside chanted, "Tsang Yam-kuen! (eat shit)."

Tsang's anointment for Chief Executive, which Hong Kong calls an "election" even though the winner is pre-determined by Beijing and its cronies in the 795-member election committee, is a farce. He won Sunday with 649 votes to 123 for the challenger Alan Leong. Five votes were spoiled. I guess that is something of an improvement over past "elections" in which the pro-Beijing man ran unopposed.

Veteran democratic lawmaker, Emily Lau articulated the irony of Tsang's closing campaign event: "A small-circle party for the small-circle election. Just as you cannot vote on Sunday, nor can you share in the fun inside," she said.

The Friday night rally for Tsang, which involved performances from local celebrities for an audience of 3000 selected for their loyal support, should have backfired. Throughout the election period, his campaign team had been tight-lipped about Tsang's public appearances so that protesters could not plan ahead. Even reporters were not told where Tsang would be until midnight the night before, so if reporters friendly with the pro-democracy camp informed them, there would be no time to prepare.

Friday's event on the other hand, was well publicized before hand, allowing the more radical political parties to gather force. It was an amalgamation of environmental activists and

conservationists who stole the show with more manpower, more loudspeakers, and well-tuned anti-Tsang slogans and posters.

One depicted a cartoon Godzilla with Tsang's face, trampling over the Star Ferry clock-tower, a much loved relic recently destroyed by the administration to make way for more development on ever-shrinking Victoria Harbor.

Lawmaker-activist Leung Kwok-hung had prepared a red coffin to hand to Tsang as a gift, congratulating him on his "promotion" to a second term, thereby killing off Hong Kong freedoms.

Such arresting images usually get the press in a frenzy, and, indeed, valiant photographers and reporters alike were getting squashed and battered in the melee, climbing on trees and walls to capture the moment. Tsang's would become the perfect illustration of the attitude: "I will not hear nor see, those who do not agree with me."

Alas. The local media showed itself only too willing to submit to having their hands tied and mouths taped shut. Tsang's boards may not have succeeded in keeping the protesters quiet. But the local news outlets got the message not to spoil the party.

There were no images of protesters in the region's largest English-language newspaper, the South China Morning Post, which was doubly mystifying since it had a picture of an aesthetically disadvantaged teen with grubby hands and yellow nails casting a mock ballot – a perfect second picture to correspond with the story.

Instead, a picture of Tsang with his hands raised, surrounded by high-profile supporters, was used on the front page, while on an inside page was a story headlined, "Incumbent reflects on a wonderful journey."

There was no mention of the protest at all in the English-language business newspaper, The Standard. Small pictures of protesters wedged in the wall of the playground were published in some Chinese newspapers although the majority of the content concentrated on Tsang's speech and his "miracle journey."

Ironically that same day, the democratic challenger, Alan Leong, held a forum on freedom of expression, which had an unsurprisingly low turnout. A journalism professor from Chinese University, Joseph Chan, spoke of the "spiral of silence" that has gripped Hong Kong newspapers recently. "Unfortunately that spiral is spinning downwards," he said, citing a study that found in 2006, over 80 per cent of reporters thought there was self-censorship in the industry.

Leong's fellow Civic Party member, Margaret Ng, a former journalist, said she usually refrained from speaking in such forums since they were reserved for the public to voice opinions, but she could not contain her dismay. She said it appeared to have become the norm for government officials or information officers to phone a senior editor to complain about a certain piece that has been published, or influence a story about to be published. She said that when she was a newspaper reporter, this would have sparked outrage.

Unfortunately, ask any local reporter and they will tell you they have had such an experience, or know a close friend who has. Most of the time, what seems to have angered the official is not a factual error, but a certain angle, or the fact, that, 'goodness gracious, you actually listen to those crazy NGOs?' Apparently, a report cannot be fair unless there is an exact balance of words dedicated to the government and the 'other side'.

Perhaps the government should sort out the one-sided election first before complaining of one-sided

news reports.

P.S.

* From Asia Sentinel:

http://www.asiasentinel.com/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=430&pop=1&page=0&Itemid=35

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