

## Political Party Development in Hong Kong

By Christine Chung

While there is fundamental disagreement across the Hong Kong political spectrum about when the Special Administrative Region (SAR) will be ready to elect its chief executive and all (rather than only half) the members of its legislature by universal suffrage, there is almost complete consensus about political parties themselves. Simply put, Hong Kong's political parties are not yet able to match the vital role of their counterparts in more developed democracies. Various spokesmen from Beijing have cited the state of political parties and a general lack of political "talent" in Hong Kong as indications of Hong Kong's un-readiness for greater democracy. This has been echoed by both of its post-1997 chief executives. Though the parties have made strides in recent years to meet expectations, they remain hampered by structural impediments and the external environment as well as their own weaknesses.

### Background

In a population of about seven million, there are four major political parties. The largest, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), claims 6,565 members; the Liberal Party 891; and the newest, the Civic Party (CP), 155 members. The fourth is the Democratic Party (DP), but its membership appears to be in flux due to a controversial law that requires public disclosure of party members' names and personal addresses, as for limited companies. With DP leaders effectively banned from traveling to the mainland, many members and supporters regard affiliation with it to be a potential professional liability, and for years its membership has hovered around 600. Hong Kong's unique political axis divides parties along pro-Beijing and pro-democracy lines that place the DAB and the Liberal Party on the former with the DP and Civic Party along the latter. At the same time, labor unions that function as parties, a handful of smaller "pressure groups" and independents all figure prominently in this picture.

While the low level of active participation reflects Hong Kong's disenchantment with parties, various public opinion surveys and focus group studies, including those commissioned by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), have examined their failure to appeal to the citizenry. Few people believe any of the existing parties adequately represent them or their interests. According to some observers, the dire state of Hong Kong's parties began with the British colonial administration's deliberate policy of precluding any civic education, thus retarding the development of the people's political awareness. Others argue that Hong Kong's parties are still too young to be effective; the DAB was established in 1992 and the DP in 1994. While these explanations may be comfortable, a similar lack of experience did not prevent Eastern European counterparts from playing an important part in political change there and speaks to a potential in Hong Kong that remains unrealized.

Hong Kong's governance system may provide insight into this conundrum. Various factors handicap the development of political parties in this system: 1) no explicit legal

recognition of political parties exists although the SAR's constitution, the Basic Law, does allude to them; 2) the balance of executive-legislative relations that endows most power to the executive branch though the chief executive is expressly forbidden from maintaining any party affiliation, thus cutting off parties from access to political power; 3) policy decisions have undermined party development, including the 1999 elimination of the Municipal Councils that had provided a training ground for aspiring politicians, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa's decision to resume appointment of District Council members in 2002 and the failure to give the councils additional power as promised when the Municipal Councils were eliminated; 4) a unique legislative system which has half of the members directly-elected by geographical constituencies and the other half by extremely restricted functional constituencies, which means that votes on motions and certain bills essentially require a majority of both groups; 5) a change from a more appropriate first-past-the-post to proportional representation system for the directly-elected half of the legislature; and 6) an election campaign subsidy regime that does not encourage party membership but rather provides incentives to independents.

These external structural problems hamper the development of political parties by limiting their opportunities to exercise real power. At the same time, the parties in many ways often act as their own worst enemies. The DAB and DP used to be mirror images of each other. Internal party democracy remains seriously deficient in both. Both remain unwilling to adopt a level of professionalism that would see more effective communications, constituency relations, campaign organizing and fundraising. Political party work appears amateurish because for most active participants it is an extracurricular activity. Yet it speaks to the deep personal commitment and dedication of party adherents that they remain involved in this much maligned institution. One illustration of how difficult it is for them is to consider the profile of one former party chairman. He was a full-time party chairman, full-time Legislative Council (Legco) member, full-time university professor, full-time spouse and father to two young children. Yet it was not unusual to see him at political rallies selling T-shirts and at public forums giving speeches, serious under-eye bags notwithstanding. Given the lack of usual motivations for political engagement—professional networking opportunities, access to those in positions of power and the potential for partaking in the 'revolving door' of politics and lobbying prevalent in the US—participation is all the more remarkable and in fact quite inspiring.

### **NDI's Party Program**

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs' engagement in Hong Kong began in 1997 during the handover period. NDI has continued to produce a series of comprehensive reports entitled "The Promise of Democratization in Hong Kong," that periodically assesses the prospects for developing a democratic electoral framework and identifies the obstacles that impede it.

In early 2002, NDI began to work with political parties from across the spectrum to develop the technical skills of members as well as to discuss various strategic considerations with party leaders through workshops and consultation. That spring NDI conducted two separate day-long multi-party workshops covering an overview of political party principles—one day for "pro-Beijing" groups that included the DAB, the Hong Kong Progressive Alliance and the Liberal Party and the other with "pro-democracy" parties, mainly the Democratic Party, The Frontier and the Citizens Party. Leaders of both camps had insisted upon this separation. Encouraged by feedback from participants and party leaders, NDI opened a Hong Kong office that autumn to ramp up its programs. For two years, NDI conducted numerous single-party training workshops for the DAB, the DP, The Frontier, and the Article 45 Concern Group, focusing on

specific skills such as communications, campaigning, fundraising and running constituency offices. NDI also held consultations with leaders on internal party democracy, message development and organizational strategies.

In addition to this direct technical assistance, NDI commissioned the Public Opinion Programme (POP) at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) to conduct public opinion polls on perceptions of parties. These asked questions submitted by the parties as well as others developed by NDI and POP. At the same time, NDI supported efforts to train Hong Kong's erratic media to limit reporting of what amounts to an epidemic of less-than-useful polls conducted by political parties and other groups with questionable methodology by offering a seminar on basic international standards for reporting on polls. In addition, the SAR government's Central Policy Unit conducts what are presumed to be more professionally organized surveys. However, the government does not release data nor provide information about its methodology. Instead, it engages in a highly problematic practice of selectively citing outcomes when politically expedient.

In 2006, NDI also commissioned the Transition Project at Hong Kong Baptist University to do a comprehensive public opinion poll on attitudes towards political parties, including the newly constituted Civic Party. This followed a constitutional reform battle that saw the pro-democracy camp block the Chief Executive's proposal for modest changes to the electoral system. NDI followed up by commissioning consulting company APCO Asia to conduct a series of focus groups on perceptions of parties. Reports from both studies were released to the public while NDI offered advance release and private presentations to the main parties.

Party leaders at one point asked for assistance in networking with other like-minded groups. In 2002 and 2003, NDI facilitated participation of party representatives in various relevant international conferences. It was difficult their value as participants never acknowledged the opportunity though they did submit expenses for reimbursement indicating they had attended the programs. Therefore, NDI ceased this program.

## **Challenges**

In the beginning, the challenges were more prosaic: getting party leaders to commit to dates for programs far enough in advance to make planning possible as NDI relies upon a network of busy, experienced and highly in demand pro bono volunteers from US, Canadian and European parties; competing for the attention of party members and staff (surprisingly, many party staffers are not party members) on precious weekend days; the usual difficulties in making programs appealing and meaningful since party work is an extracurricular activity for most activists.

During the September 2004 Legislative Council elections, the 'left-wing' media alleged that NDI had provided funding to the Democratic Party. The DP responded that it had never accepted funding from NDI and that anyway the DAB had also taken advantage of similar non-financial technical assistance from NDI. The DAB representative phoned me in Beijing while I was busy implementing NDI's mainland rule of law and governance program. He was upset by the morning radio talk shows whose hosts had questioned the DAB about its involvement with NDI. By that evening, I found myself being interviewed by local network TVB in my hotel room to refute charges that NDI had provided financial assistance to any of Hong Kong's parties. The footage had to be transmitted to Hong Kong via internet for the late evening news broadcast.

The media barrage that followed quickly degenerated into allegations of CIA connections and other, increasingly absurd charges. While the incompetence and/or malevolence of the local media were both annoying and risible, the effect of the ongoing attacks was less than amusing. The DAB subsequently refused any further NDI technical assistance in single-party format. Given the delicate balance of being nonpartisan in Hong Kong, the Institute could no longer work with the pro-democracy camp on a single party basis either.

NDI had to revise its approach. Two months later, NDI co-sponsored with HKU and its Faculties of Law and Social Sciences a symposium on political party laws and financing. The program was open to the public, and registration had to be closed after more than 100 people subscribed. NDI provided simultaneous translation for the event. Some 75 people representing civil society, academia, government, media, political parties and the diplomatic community attended. The morning session focused on party laws from a comparative perspective with international presenters addressing experiences from Europe, Korea and Australia, while the second part addressed party financing. Political party representatives served as commentators on a panel that included the DP Chairman, The Frontier's 'Convener' and a member of the DAB's Central Committee. The DAB noted that it did not want a party law that would restrict the growth of parties but would favor legal recognition of parties regardless of whether that came via a new law or amendments to current law. The DP expressed reservations about a new political party law on grounds that it could give the government more control over party development and therefore advocated a minimalist approach to enacting any legislation. The conference was intended to jump-start a dialogue about the legal infrastructure of party politics in Hong Kong that had been quiet after Legco conducted a study on the subject and shelved it.

In early 2005, NDI and HKU held a follow-up public symposium on political party-media relations that involved legislators from various parties plus leaders of civil society and media outlets. NDI continued to organize multi-party activities, including two longer campaign "schools." These workshops conducted over weekends in six-month periods attempted to keep a class of dedicated party members together to build on skills rather than bring participants to periodic day-long programs that constantly saw a range of different participants. Last year NDI offered a comprehensive political communications course that included significant emphasis on personal communications skills from public speaking to TV interviews to holding press conferences. This year NDI has focused on campaigning skills for prospective District Council candidates.

In addition to a party-strengthening program, NDI has continued to support various civil initiatives that address various facets of democracy and good governance. These have included think tank SynergyNet's annual governance review, conferences on constitutional reform by a consortium of organizations including the Hong Kong Policy Research Institute, and Civic Exchange's town planning guides.

### **International Assistance Prospects**

During the past four years, NDI was the only international NGO engaging in political development assistance in the SAR. One reason is the difficulty of providing any form of development assistance in a place as prosperous and sophisticated as Hong Kong. Another is that NGOs and groups with rule of law and good governance programs on the mainland are afraid to risk negative fallout from Beijing from political development work in Hong Kong.

The operating environment has shifted gradually in this period. Hong Kong appears to be increasing insular, with shrill accusations of foreign "interference" any time

commentary on political developments appears. Nevertheless, international attention to Hong Kong's political development remains important. As China strives to expand its leadership role in the region and more broadly in the world, international opinion does matter. China's global integration will continue to pressure it to meet its obligations under various treaties and agreements, including the Sino-British Agreement that set the framework for transferring sovereignty over Hong Kong. For example, the United Nations Human Rights Committee conducted a March hearing on Hong Kong's report and concluded that the reservation on Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights should be invalidated and that Hong Kong should have universal and equal suffrage. The SAR government replied that the concluding observations by the United Nations Human Rights Committee do not constitute international law and are not legally binding.

Meantime, the political parties confront the chicken-vs-egg dilemma. They cannot attract the best and the brightest until they provide an avenue for these individuals to reach positions of meaningful participation in the political process. And the establishment will continue to argue that parties cannot be given a greater role in governance until they achieve a level of competence that justifies it. Hong Kong's governance problem is complex. It involves not only individuals and institutions in the SAR but also the Central Authorities. Parties are both stymied by the system and contribute to the present gridlock. Nevertheless, the milieu is not static. The four popular legislator-barristers who had formed the core of the elite and tiny Article 45 Concern Group earlier this year decided to take the leap and form a political party. The DAB and the Hong Kong Progressive Alliance merged late last year with reported synergies that have surpassed most members' expectations. The party scene continues to evolve. The emergence of former civil servants Anson Chan and Regina Ip into the equation has led to speculation about the need to change calculations.

The question of how the international community can assist party development is constantly revisited by NDI. The next couple years will bring a series of elections: in December the Election Committee, next March the Chief Executive, next November the District Councils, and in 2008 the Legco elections. Since elections can provide the best opportunities for the parties to expand and grow, the outlook for Hong Kong's parties is promising. ■

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