

THE CIVIC PARTY'S MISSION

By Audrey Eu

The Civic Party was founded on March 19, 2006 after a short gestation of about three months, following the government's failed attempt to push through a constitutional package in the name of greater and faster democracy. But the government plan involved creating even more functional constituencies (often criticized as “small circle” constituencies for sectional interests) for the Legislature as well as giving district councilors appointed by the Chief Executive the power to elect the Chief Executive. This incestuous relationship between appointed councilors and the Chief Executive can hardly be justified on any democratic grounds, yet the government would not agree to drop appointed councilors from the proposal for at least the next 10 years. All these were serious objections in principle. The government would not even promise a timetable or a road map towards universal suffrage other than saying that we would gradually get there – ultimately. The road for democracy appeared long and arduous. It was time to gather new strength. A new party was needed.

The aim for the new party is encapsulated in its name. The Chinese name “*gong min*” (公民) is short for *gong yi* (公義) (social justice) and *min zhu* (民主) (democracy) and when joined together *gong min* also pertains to civil society. Hence the English name. The Civic Party believes that the government must take civil society into partnership, reflect the will of the community, abide by the rule of law and protect constitutional rights. On the other hand, the Civic Party also believes that all of us who take Hong Kong as our home have a civic duty to do our part in bringing about a democratic society rooted in justice and fairness for all.

The usual question asked is why form a new party when there is already the Democratic Party formed in 1994? What is the difference between us?

One obvious difference lies in our structure. The Democratic Party has a slightly more elaborate system owing to its longer history. We would like to start with a more flexible structure which we hope will serve our needs. We also feel there should be division of labour between party development and the parliamentary work. Thus we have a party chairman, Professor Kuan Hsin Chi, Head of the Department of Government and Public Administration of the Chinese University, and myself as the party leaders heading the six members who are elected members of the Legislative Council.

The Civic Party works with the Democratic Party and the other pan-democrats in our fight for universal suffrage. But it is fair to say that there is quite a wide spectrum when it comes to the means adopted. The Civic Party consists mainly of professionals and academics who are more at ease with advocacy and research and less accustomed to photogenic gestures of our more colourful allies, such as burning the Basic Law or carrying a black coffin. We believe that diversity may well enrich the democratic cause by offering more choices to different types of voters.

One matter for which the Civic Party is often taken to task by pro-Beijing forces is the statement in our website that we aspire to be a “governing party”. This is “politically incorrect” since Beijing frowns upon party politics and is never going to tolerate a “governing party” other than the Communist Party. In fact, the law prohibits the Chief Executive from belonging to any political party. But the Basic Law (the Chinese legislation of 1990 that serves as Hong Kong’s de facto constitution) promises a high degree of autonomy with Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong. It also promises universal suffrage of the Chief Executive as well as all seats in the Legislature. If one takes the Basic Law seriously, as we do, aspiring towards governance is thus a matter of duty. Aspiring towards better governance also ensures that we think constructively, criticize fairly, act responsibly and come up with real alternatives. A political party without any aspiration to ever become a governing party seems to deny the very essence of its existence. Unfortunately, the Hong Kong political structure is so absurd and political reality so hard that any aspiration toward future governance is considered a sign of political naivety.

Although there is little doubt that most Hong Kong people desire greater democracy and early universal suffrage, the odds are formidable. Many people here depend on the Mainland for their livelihoods, for China has one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Joining a political party that does not find favour with Beijing is a negative burden that many people can ill afford to carry. Even donating to such a cause can be dangerous. Despite the odds, the Civic Party is taking on one of the biggest challenges since its recent foundation

Sir David Akers Jones, the former colonial secretary, has this famous saying: the Chinese are not afraid of elections provided they know the result beforehand. The last two elections of the Chief Executive were uncontested. In 2002, Tung Chee Hwa got 714 nominations from the 800-strong Election Committee despite his dismal performance and widespread public discontent. In 2005, he had to resign before his five-year term ended when people who had no vote at the ballot box voted with their feet by marching in the streets and with their mouths by chanting “Down with Tung”. The replacement, Donald Tsang, secured 710 nominations from the same Election Committee. This pre-empted anyone else from getting the necessary 100 nominations needed to qualify as a candidate. The democrats once proposed amending the Chief Executive Election Ordinance to put a cap on the number of nominations that a candidate may be allowed to get in this small-circle election but the proposal was ruled out of order by Rita Fan, the President of the Legislative Council.

History looks as if it is about to repeat itself in the forthcoming Chief Executive election in March next year. Everyone in Hong Kong – without exception – knows Donald Tsang is going to be re-elected for another term and that he is the candidate favored by Beijing. Who wants to incur the displeasure of Beijing by upsetting the apple cart?

The Civic Party and the Democratic Party worked together to put forward Alan Leong, a legislator and Civic Party member as its candidate for the Chief Executive election scheduled for next March—for which he would qualify only by receiving at least 100 nominations from the 800 Election Committee members, a matter that appeared to be of considerable doubt. The test came on December 10 when the Election Committee held its sub-sector elections. The electorate consists of about 200,000 voters (including corporate voters), mainly from big businesses, pro Beijing forces and professionals. Even before the election, 427 seats were returned un-contested. The democrats supported a list of 137 candidates for the remaining 373 seats and were overjoyed to see 114 democrats returned with high votes in their

respective sub-sectors. This should be sufficient to give Hong Kong its first contested election for Chief Executive although the final outcome is not in doubt.

But why fight a battle we cannot win? Indeed, some of the other pan-democrats scorn this small circle election and denounce us for taking part.

But this is far from a lost cause. Indeed, too much is at stake. Hong Kong has reached a critical stage. Everyone can see that the current political system is unsustainable. The Chief Executive is elected by a small circle mandate of big business and pro-Beijing factions. He becomes beholden to this inner circle rather than to the wider public interest. Further, the Chief Executive cannot belong to any political party and therefore cannot be ensured of support in the Legislative Council. So he turns to the same power base of big business and pro Beijing factions.

The election system for the Legislative Council is also skewed. Half the members are elected by geographical constituencies and have a mandate from 3,200,000 registered voters, but the other half is elected by functional constituencies consisting of big businesses, pro-Beijing forces and professionals. It is basically the same 200,000 electorate for the 800-strong Election Committee. Yet every motion put forward by members has to be carried by a majority of both halves. This effectively gives the privileged minority a veto over the majority. The lack of popular mandate and the need for behind-the-scenes horse-trading creates a hot bed for cronyism and a strong suspicion of collusion between the government and big business or close allies of the government. Despite the call for harmony, there is little attempt to build harmony on equality or fairness.

To make things worse, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. Our Gini coefficient—a measure of inequality of distribution used by economists—at 0.525 in 2001 ranks rock bottom amongst developed countries. Our economy has recovered but the trickle-down effect has not really happened. One person in seven lives below the poverty line. One child out of four comes from a poor family and there is real fear of cross-generational poverty. Social discontent can lead to social unrest under a system that favors the privileged. We are looking at long-term problems like health care reform, taxation reform, aging population and worsening pollution. Yet the government seems unable to push for reform or to plan ahead. Without a popular mandate, the Chief Executive and his team spend time lobbying on ill-planned and little-researched policies.

Why such ill planning? Because our chief executive, Donald Tsang, does not know his next move unless he is assured in advance of Beijing's support. He does not know whom he can appoint as principal officers unless they are approved first by Beijing. Needless to say, he cannot know in advance if his principal officers can work together as a team until after they are put in place. His most recent policy address, in October, was the shortest ever in Hong Kong history. He said his term only had eight months to run and he should only do things that could be "seen" and "accomplished" within that time. If every Chief Executive who comes to the last year of his five-year term does the same, we will always be missing one fifth of our time for planning ahead.

Every other polity with a stable government has succession planned or an opposition waiting in the wings to take over. But here in Hong Kong, no one dares say he will be Chief Executive until the last minute when he is about to be anointed. And then he has to resign

from his political party, if he has an affiliation, and must pick his ministers, probably from amongst people he has never worked with before.

Is that really a sustainable system? Would you invest in a company that has to change its Chairman and Board of Directors every five years but has no succession plan, and with new managers not chosen until shortly before time for the changeover? It sounds like a crazy system, if you can call it a system at all. A change must come soon, for every day Hong Kong pays a price for time wasted. Universal suffrage is not a panacea for all problems, but it is certainly a start towards installing social balance and equal participation for all. With a political system that makes more sense, with a reasonable timetable for open and fair elections and with political careers becoming a viable option, political talents – and there is no shortage of them in Hong Kong – will emerge.

Perhaps even more basic than all this, we in the Civic Party believe improvement will only come from competition. Hong Kong competes with the rest of world in everything else, so why should it fear a competitive election for the top office? With a contested Chief Executive election, the candidates can debate the policies and the way ahead that is best suited for Hong Kong.

With the result of the recent December 10 election, we are cautiously optimistic about Alan Leong's chance of getting his 100 nominations (never underestimate Beijing's lobbying powers and influence over the Election Committee members), we are taking our first step forward and it will not be our last. ■

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