

## HONG KONG'S DEMOCRACY FACES A “BOTTLENECK”

By Wendy Leutert

When talking about Hong Kong's political development, one often hears catchphrases such as “stability and prosperity” and “working together for the good of Hong Kong.” Both the Hong Kong and mainland governments have emphasized consensus politics—not democratization—as the route of choice for Hong Kong's political future, a topic which seldom produces great accord. Is the renewed focus on consensus based on recognition that adversarial Western-style party politics are unsuitable in a Chinese context, or is it better understood as part of the mainland government's strategy to forestall future democracy?

An analysis suggests the latter explanation to be more plausible. Recent political events can be best understood as part of the mainland government's strategy to slow democratization until it can create “bottleneck democracy,” or a political system in which some democratic choice may be permitted but is carefully constrained by structural and other means.

Consensus politics have long been the norm in Hong Kong's system of governance. Whereas democracy assumes conflict and aims to resolve it peacefully, consensus politics attempts to minimize the expression of conflicting interests by co-opting or incorporating them. In the colonial British government, consensus politics—consensus among members of the Legislative Council (Legco), and between government and the Hong Kong people—was maintained by simply excluding particular types of individuals from political power.

After the handover in 1997, maintaining consensus politics became far more difficult because the necessary agreements were not only among members of Legco and between the administration and the populace, but also between the administration and Legco and, more importantly, between the mainland government and all of the aforementioned groups. The Second Report of the Constitutional Development Task Force, created in 2004 by former Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa to oversee future constitutional development in Hong Kong, stated: “There are quite a number of views which affirm that ‘One Country’ is the premise on which ‘Two Systems’ is implemented. . . . There are views that we must pay heed to the views of the Central Authorities on Hong Kong's constitutional development, and discuss the issues with them to seek consensus.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Second Report of the Constitutional Development Task Force: Issues of Principle in the Basic Law Relating to Constitutional Development,” Task Force on Constitutional Development, April 2004, <http://www.info.gov.hk/cab/cab-review/eng/report2/pdf/secondreport-e.pdf>, accessed 8/7/04, 23.

Tensions in Hong Kong over the issue of constitutional reform have mounted in the years following the massive July 1, 2003 protest march. The Hong Kong administration and the mainland government have often stressed the unfortunate nature of the “conflict” and “disagreement” that have arisen among different factions in Legco, between these factions and the administration, and between the administration and the public. In 2004, Legco President Rita Fan succinctly described the relationship between the Administration and the Legislative Council as “not without tension.”<sup>2</sup>

Most recently, following the December 2005 defeat of the administration’s proposed democratic reform package—endorsed by the mainland government—Chief Executive Donald Tsang accused the democratic camp of inflexibility because it refused to endorse any reform measures without a specific timetable for direct election of the chief executive and all members of Legco. Although Tsang’s comments were a specific criticism of the democrats’ unwillingness to compromise, they also express the administration’s broader frustration with the lack of a political system in which agreement and not argument is the norm. Why is consensus politics the ultimate political goal for the Hong Kong administration and, more importantly, for the mainland government?

According to the first and broader argument, state socialist political systems—China included—view politics as a domain of accord, not of debate and potential dissonance. Such a belief provides a logical ideological basis for one-party leadership, the supremacy of collective social interests over those of individuals, and a powerful state unchecked by judicial or legislative opposition. It is a well-known Confucian principle that harmony and order are keys to the strength of a family, group or state, while those who fall into discord and disarray are weak and susceptible to control by others. Fear of *luan*, or chaos, is an enduring part of Chinese political culture. Harmony and order therefore become preeminent goals to be achieved by the suppression of particular interests which, if left unchecked, could eventually lead to division or worse.

Given the emphasis on the achievement and maintenance of national and social unity in Chinese history (the Confucian precept above at times certainly possessed literal as well as metaphorical significance), it is hardly surprising that adversarial Western-style democratic models appear incompatible and unappealing. A current Hong Kong legislator echoed this view, commenting that “after the handover in 1997, the People’s Central Government is suspicious that party politics will breed Western-style adversarial politics, which would destabilize Hong Kong.”<sup>3</sup>

The second and more plausible argument suggests that the renewed emphasis on consensus politics is part of a broader strategy by the mainland government to stall democratization of Hong Kong’s political system until it is able to gain greater control over subsequent political developments. In mainland China, a small minority—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), roughly 70 million members out of a population of more than 1.3 billion—seeks to maintain political control over a majority. Any challenge to its political hegemony is to be avoided, which in Hong Kong’s case likely lies more in its ‘demonstration effect’ to the mainland than in any tangible political threat. The central government views democratization in Hong Kong, as it does the limited steps in that direction in the PRC, as something instrumental to furthering a prescribed common end, not to initiate debate over what that end might be.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Rita Fan, April 11, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Selina Chow, April 11, 2005.

This view is likely to lead to adoption of a state strategy in which democratic elements will be introduced or allowed if they are useful in achieving a fixed aim or in avoiding undesirable outcomes, such as embarrassment in the international community or marches similar to that of July 1, 2003.

Whether or not the mainland government views democratization in Hong Kong as something instrumental, it has become increasingly forced to recognize that it is not optional. The Hong Kong public's demand for democracy has not disappeared and in fact is likely to intensify. Outright suppression would surely be unpopular with the public and the international community. The administration and mainland government's appeals to stall the process until Hong Kong's "actual situation" is right can be effective for only so long. Promises of possible democratic reform were postponed from 2004 to 2008, and likely will be delayed again at least until 2012. However, it remains extremely improbable that the mainland government will accept universal suffrage in the election of the chief executive and all Legco members even at that time.

Given these circumstances, the most probable outcome of future democratization is what can be termed "bottleneck democracy"—a political structure in which some democratic choice is permitted but carefully constrained.

In the case of selecting a chief executive, this would merely entail retaining or slightly modifying the current system by which that official is chosen by an election committee. For instance, the administration's failed 2005 reform package contained a measure that would have doubled the size of the committee from 800 to 1600 and thus would have created a body with a greater diversity of opinion. No matter how significant this plurality of viewpoints might have been, the proposal clearly remains far less democratic than filling the office by direct election. Such measures offer examples of bottleneck democracy within the structure of the administration; if implemented, they will continue to constrain choice even as they expand it.

If bottleneck democracy is indeed the mainland government's goal, it will be more difficult to achieve in Legco. In this case, it would be necessary to control the selection process for sixty positions, not just one. The 2005 package would have modestly reformed the system by adding 10 new seats, with five directly elected and five selected by district councilors; since its defeat no new proposals have emerged.

Nevertheless, in the absence of structural changes the mainland government could still move toward bottleneck democracy by fostering the growth of pro-Beijing parties such as the Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong, using the media to make "acceptable" candidates publicly known and cultivating young politicians known to be sympathetic to its views. Pro-Beijing and moderate parties in Hong Kong have strengthened considerably during the past several years, and the mainland government already uses the media to express its political preferences. It is likely that this approach will constitute the mainland government's primary tactic in the coming years. Indeed, the Task Force's Second Report called the current dearth of political talent as an important reason for delaying Hong Kong's democratization.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard Chan, a legislator representing the Insurance functional constituency and a member of the Executive Council commented: “Beijing needs to find more middle-ground types of people to come forward into politics in order to attract the silent majority [of those who would not wish to see Hong Kong in confrontation with Beijing]. They don’t like the two extremes. ...The problem is not them; the problem is us—because we have not given them that choice.”<sup>5</sup>

However, others argue that political reform could help to develop a democratic civil society that would provide the best environment for cultivating future political talent. Leung Kwok Hung (popularly known as Long Hair), a legislator representing the April Fifth Action organization, has said: “It is not the political party that trains young political talent—civil society trains young political talent. Society is always training future leaders; it is much broader. Who trained Nelson Mandela? Che Guevara?”<sup>6</sup>

As suggested above, the renewed emphasis on consensus politics can be best understood as part of a broader mainland strategy to soft-pedal the profound political changes of recent years while attempting to gain greater control over the course of Hong Kong’s political development. Growing public pressure for democratization has created an environment in which consensus politics is not likely to be a long-term solution.

However, although the mainland government might not be able to circumvent future democracy, it will almost certainly act to circumscribe it. Evolution toward models such as that of bottleneck democracy is a logical and appealing option because it offers a way to expand choice in order to appease public demand, but still maintain ultimate control. Such a system is satisfying on a superficial level because diversity of opinion and discussion—albeit limited—are allowed, but in the end only certain outcomes are permissible and ultimately possible. ■

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Bernard Chan, August 10, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Leung Kwok Hung, March 30, 2005.