

A Party with a Future

By Tsang Yok Sing

With a membership of more than 10,000, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) is now the largest political party in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR). It holds more seats in the current Legislative Council (Legco) than any other party. In the latest district council election, which took place last November, the DAB won 115 seats, more than all the “pan-democratic” parties taken together, and more than any one political party had ever held. According to recent surveys, the DAB has a higher support rating than most other political groups.

All this was hardly expected by anybody, not least by its founding members, when the “pro-Beijing” party was formed 16 years ago. In 1994, the DAB took part in District Board (now called District Council) elections for the first time. It fielded 83 candidates, and won only 37 seats. The following year, in the Legco elections, the party contested seven of the directly elected seats and won only two.

In the early 1990s, when memories of the June 4 incident at Tiananmen were fresh and anti-Beijing feelings were widespread in the Hong Kong public, most people, including those in the pro-Beijing camp, thought that no candidate seen to be friendly with the Chinese government would stand a chance in popular elections in Hong Kong. The results of the first direct Legco elections, held in autumn 1991, provided strong proof that friendly ties with Beijing were the “kiss of death”: all the candidates with a pro-Beijing background were defeated.

No one could tell how long this anti-Beijing mood among the voters would persist, and most of the prominent pro-Beijing personalities decided to stay away from the elections, and looked for ways to curb the powers of the elected institutions, apparently destined to be dominated by enemies of Beijing.

But among Beijing’s friends in Hong Kong there was a small group who believed that the viability of the “one country, two systems” arrangement depended on the successful evolution of Hong Kong’s political system towards the ultimate goal of full democracy. They also believed that, in order to secure the Chinese government’s support for Hong Kong’s steady progress towards a democratic system of

government, the pro-Beijing camp must take an active part in the city's popular elections and prove that not only those campaigning on an anti-Beijing platform could win. This small group of people decided to form a political party to rally the pro-Beijing community and fight in future elections. The DAB was the party they formed, five years before Hong Kong's scheduled return to China.

The DAB's founding members saw themselves as both patriots and democrats at the same time. To them, the quest for democracy was consistent with, and indeed dependent on, support for Beijing's "one country, two systems" policy for Hong Kong. They believed that Hong Kong's democratization could be achieved only on the basis of mutual trust and cooperation with Beijing. Such a relationship was lacking then, with the transfer of government only a few years ahead. The DAB therefore took it upon itself to bridge the gap between the Hong Kong public and the Chinese government.

Does pro-Beijing mean anti-democracy?

But before it could achieve anything the DAB had to win the trust of Hong Kong people, and many thought this was an impossible task. To a majority of the Hong Kong community at that time, "pro-Beijing" was synonymous with "anti-democracy". It was a common belief that the Chinese government would never allow genuine democracy in Hong Kong because it wanted to keep control. Fighting for democracy therefore meant fighting against Beijing and its allies in Hong Kong, including the DAB.

The only way for the DAB to win the people's support is to put itself to the test of the ballot box. The party fielded candidates in every popular election, and through its electioneering campaigns it endeavored to convince Hong Kong residents that its members were working for their interests, despite the party's friendly relationship with Beijing.

DAB members made conscientious efforts to show they would always use their ties with the Mainland to serve the people of Hong Kong. In 1994, for example, Hong Kong residents were alarmed when the Guangdong authorities suddenly announced that all travelers entering the province through the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border would be required to take a blood test for AIDS. While the British Government in Hong Kong could do nothing about it, the DAB sent a delegation to Beijing and managed to persuade the Central Government to make Guangdong

abandon the policy.

As another example, the DAB was the first to suggest to the Central Government, in 1995, that special offices should be set up to provide assistance to the increasing number of Hong Kong residents who came across various problems in the Mainland. In response to this request, the Guangdong Provincial Government set up a Hong Kong and Macao Division in its Complaints Department. The Division has provided help and redress to thousands of Hong Kong people.

The situation improved considerably for the pro-Beijing party after Hong Kong's smooth return to China. The people of Hong Kong saw that the Chinese Government not only was keeping its promises about "one country, two systems", but also doing whatever within its ability to help maintain economic prosperity and social stability in the SAR. To a gradually increasing proportion of the Hong Kong population, there was no longer any stigma attached to being "pro-Beijing". As public sentiment changed, the DAB's efforts were awarded by growing voter support in successive elections, and within the early years of the SAR it had established itself as one of the major parties in the Legislative Council and the District Councils.

The central government has laid down a definite timetable for moving towards full democracy in Hong Kong. According to a decision last December by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR will be elected by universal suffrage in 2017, followed by universal suffrage for electing the whole legislature in 2020. This decision will usher in a new stage of development of political parties in the SAR. As the most effective organizations for managing election campaigns, as well as for aggregating and representing social interests, political parties are set to play a much bigger role in both the legislative and executive branches of the government when full democracy is attained.

The DAB will not be the slowest party to take advantage of the new opportunities arising from the imminent constitutional reform. Building on its strengths, the party will gear itself up in the coming years to meet the challenges of the 2017 and 2020 elections.

Searching for new talent

Nurturing political talent has always been, and will continue to be, at the top of the party's agenda. Earlier this year, 30 young DAB members

were sent to a political leadership training program specially designed for the party and taught jointly by leading universities in Hong Kong, Beijing and London. In the past few years, on the party's recommendation, the SAR Government has appointed a number of its members to serve in various advisory bodies. The administration's new team of political appointees includes an undersecretary and two political assistants who are DAB members.

The party will capitalize on its broad membership basis. It has already developed an extensive community network through its 10,000-plus members and 18 district branches with over 120 offices spread all over the SAR. Its target is to increase party membership to over 30,000, amounting to about 1% of Hong Kong's electorate, within the next decade. Contact points with the community will then be established in every public housing estate and private residential neighborhood, forming an efficient communication system between the party and the public.

Besides expanding its district networks, the DAB is also aiming to strengthen its connection with the business and professional sectors. In recent years there has been a significant increase of party members with business and professional backgrounds. In some professions, such as law and accounting, DAB membership has reached a "critical mass" that enables a branch of the party to be formed, to liaise more closely with other members of the profession, to keep track of their interests and concerns and to tap their expertise in public policy deliberations.

Serving as a bridge between the Hong Kong public and Mainland authorities has always been a forte of the DAB. With dozens of its members serving in the People's Congress and the Political Consultative Conference, both at the national and provincial levels, the DAB is unrivalled in its connections with the central government and local authorities in the mainland. Needs and aspirations of Hong Kong citizens, which the party gathers through its extensive community network, are conveyed to the central government for timely consideration in formulating policies on Hong Kong.

The party has set up a special department to deal with complaints and requests for assistance from Hong Kong residents who have encountered various kinds of problems in their business or other activities in the Mainland. Demand for this service is growing rapidly, and more resources will be deployed to maintain its quality and effectiveness.

Seeking a role in Taiwan

The DAB has made little contact with Taiwan in the past years. But as cross-strait relations are improving and cooperation with Taiwan is becoming more important for Hong Kong's economic development, the DAB is exploring the possibility of establishing useful links with Taiwan, to enhance its ability to serve the interests of the Hong Kong people. Shortly after the change of government in Taiwan, DAB leaders made an ice-breaking visit to the island and met with high-ranking officials responsible for mainland and Hong Kong affairs. The delegation was encouraged by the warm response it received. As a Hong Kong party with a good relationship with Beijing, the DAB is sure to have a role to play in improving Hong Kong-Taiwan cooperation in the coming years.

The DAB will continue to carry out policy research and put forward proposals to address the main areas of continued concern of the Hong Kong public. These include enhancing Hong Kong's competitiveness as well as the quality of life in the city, care for the elderly and the disadvantaged, working towards a consensus for constitutional reform and building a harmonious society. Research findings in these areas will help the party formulate its platform in future elections.

As a result of the DAB's success in the elections in the last 10 years, the central government and a large sector of the local pro-Beijing community have taken a more positive view of popular elections in Hong Kong. Instead of regarding the elected institutions with suspicion and trying to denigrate them, the pro-Beijing camp will now contest the seats earnestly and honestly, following the rules as everybody does. A change of mindset has unmistakably taken place, for those who want to win elections have to take a very different attitude towards public opinion than those who do not care.

It is interesting to note that many who previously predicted doom for the DAB in polls because of its pro-Beijing background, are now ascribing the party's election successes to support it gets from the Central Government. The erstwhile kiss of death has apparently turned into a kiss of life. But the DAB knows, from its experience in the many elections it has participated in, that the only way to win the hearts, and votes, of the people is to show them the party understands and cares for their concerns and aspirations. Indeed, it reveals a lack of faith in democracy and in the people of Hong Kong to believe that politicians and political parties

favoured by Beijing must have an advantage in local elections.

A controversy concerning the role of political parties remains to be resolved within the pro-Beijing camp. Will Hong Kong evolve into a political system that features a ruling party, a political party that runs the government after winning a general election? Many people still think that the central government will not allow this to happen, for fear that the SAR government may one day be taken over by a party hostile to Beijing.

The DAB, however, holds the view that the emergence of a ruling party is an unavoidable outcome of Hong Kong's political evolution. The day will come when the SAR government is to be formed by a political party that has the capability to govern and is supported by the people. It is the DAB's mission to prepare itself for this day, so that when it comes, the DAB will be a viable choice for the people of Hong Kong.



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