

October 24, 2014

Protests in Hong Kong: The Umbrella Movement

A Brief History of the Protests

Hong Kong's protests, dubbed the "Umbrella Movement" by its organizers, began on September 23, 2014, when a group of university students organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and another student organization called Scholarism, marched through central Hong Kong to protest against the China's National People's Congress Standing Committee's (NPCSC) August 31, 2014, decision, which would restrict the number of and manner in which candidates for the city's next Chief Executive may be selected. The NPCSC decision could lead to the election of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage, as provided for in Hong Kong's Basic Law (which grants Hong Kong's "high degree of autonomy" under China's "one country, two systems" policy) and the NPCSC's December 2007 decision.

In the days immediately following the march, thousands of protestors gathered in Tamar Park, the site of Hong Kong's main government buildings, calling for a meeting with Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying (C. Y. Leung). The Hong Kong government declared the demonstrations illegal, and called for the protesters to leave Tamar Park.

Early on September 26, a group of students evaded a police cordon and staged a sit-in at an open air courtyard outside of the Hong Kong government's main office building, known as Civic Square. After some clashes between the police and the students, several students were arrested. On September 28, another group, Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP), announced its decision to support the ongoing student protests.

An estimated 30,000–50,000 people gathered in Admiralty (near Tamar Park) on September 28, in response to a call from HKFS and Scholarism. Around 6:00 pm, Hong Kong police fired over 80 rounds of tear gas into the crowd of protesters and sprayed others with pepper spray. Protesters used umbrellas to shield themselves from the pepper spray and tear gas, prompting the protesters to adopt the umbrella as the symbol of the demonstrations. Police officers in riot gear attempted to disperse the protesters, but were unsuccessful. The following day, Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor announced the postponement of previously announced public consultations on election reforms until "we have settled down for a while the sentiments that we are now seeing in society."

The use of tear gas, pepper spray, and riot gear appeared to rally greater support for the protests, as well as spread the demonstrations across Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Some protesters fled the tear gas and gathered in Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. On the nights of September 29 and 30,

an estimated 100,000 people gathered in Admiralty, and hundreds rallied in Causeway Bay and Mong Kok, protesting the use of tear gas and supporting the protests.

Over the following week, the number of demonstrators at the three main locations—Admiralty, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok—declined, but the Hong Kong government appeared to make no overt effort to stop the demonstrations. In addition, anti-protest groups appeared, complaining about the economic impact and inconvenience caused by the protests, especially in Mong Kok.

On October 8, the Hong Kong government and HKFS agreed to hold talks on October 10. Following the announcement of the scheduled talks, the demonstration leaders announced a rally on the afternoon of October 10. On October 9, Chief Secretary Lam told the press that she had cancelled the talks because she "realised that the basis for a constructive dialogue between us and the students has been seriously undermined."

On October 14, the Hong Kong police cleared some of the barricades blocking roads in Admiralty and Causeway Bay, reducing the footprint of the protests. During the police action, seven officers were filmed by a local television station, kicking and beating a handcuffed protester, later identified by the Hong Kong police as Ken Tsang Kin-chiu, a member of the pro-democracy Civic Party. The seven officers have been suspended, pending an investigation. Two days later, the police dismantled the barricades and tents in Mong Kok, but protesters reassembled hours later, blocking a major road in Mong Kok. On October 16, Chief Executive Leung announced that the Hong Kong Government was reaching out to HKFS via unnamed "middlemen" to reschedule the cancelled talks. Those talks were held live on local television on the evening of October 21, but yielded no specific results.

Since the release of the NPCSC decision, the Chinese government has repeatedly publicly expressed its confidence in the ability of the Hong Kong government to handle the protests. Chinese officials have also cautioned other governments to refrain from interfering in the "internal affairs" of China. Coverage of the Hong Kong protests is heavily censored in mainland China, and the official Chinese media have alleged that "external forces" are supporting the protests.

Protest Organizers

The demonstrations in Hong Kong are being led by three separate organizations—the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism, and Occupy Central with Love and Peace—but their control over the protestors reportedly is limited, especially in Mong Kok.

The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS)

The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) is an association of the student organizations at Hong Kong's eight largest universities. Its Secretary-General is Alex Chow Yong-kang, who has been one of the leaders of the Umbrella Movement. The HKFS Vice Secretary, Lester Shum Ngo-fai, has also been a major figure in the demonstrations.

Scholarism (HKFS)

Scholarism is an organization of high school and university students. Its co-founder, Joshua Wong Chi-fung, gained prominence in Hong Kong in 2012 when he organized opposition to a "moral and national education" curriculum the Chinese government wanted the Hong Kong government to introduce in Hong Kong schools. Wong helped organize a rally of over 100,000 people after which the Hong Kong government withdrew plans to introduce the curriculum.

Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP)

Established in March 2013 by Professor Chan Kin-man, Rev. Chu Yiu-ming, and Professor Benny Tai Yiu-ting, OCLP is a grassroots organization that had originally planned to stage a large-scale sit-in in Central, Hong Kong's main business and financial center, if the Hong Kong government did not propose election reforms that meet "international standards in relation to universal suffrage," including "no unreasonable restrictions on the right to stand for election."

In June 2014, OCLP organized an informal poll in which nearly 793,000 registered voters participated. A plurality (42%) selected an option which allows for civil nomination, political party nomination, and nomination by the nominating committee. The PRC and Hong Kong governments called the Occupy Central poll "illegal" and "invalid." OCLP reportedly has generally followed the lead of HKFS and Scholarism during the protests.

Non-violent Civil Disobedience

Since the beginning of the protests, the three main organizing groups have remained committed to the principles of non-violent civil disobedience. OCLP posted a "Manual on Disobedience" on its webpage, describing the philosophy and rules of non-violent civil disobedience. The vast majority of the protesters have complied with the call for non-violence, and the organizers have trained members to intervene when tensions flare.

Obama Administration Response

White House and State Department officials reportedly have raised the issue of democratic reforms in Hong Kong with senior Chinese officials during private meetings. Following the release of the NPCSC decision, State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki stated that the U.S. government "supports universal suffrage in Hong Kong, in accordance with the Basic Law and the aspirations of the Hong Kong people." On September 29, White House Press

Secretary Josh Earnest reiterated U.S. support for universal suffrage in Hong Kong, and stated, "The United States urges the Hong Kong authorities to exercise restraint and for the protesters to express their view peacefully."

On the same day, the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong issued a statement consistent with Earnest's statement, but added, "We do not take sides in the discussion of Hong Kong's political development, nor do we support any particular individuals or groups involved in it." In addition, the White House, in response to an online petition that received over 197,000 signatures, wrote, "We believe the legitimacy of the Chief Executive will be greatly enhanced if the Basic Law's ultimate aim of selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage is fulfilled and the election provides the people of Hong Kong a genuine choice of candidates representative of the voters' will."

Congressional Response

Members of Congress from both chambers, and from both parties, have expressed concerns over the situation in Hong Kong, and support for democratic reforms in Hong Kong. Senator Marco Rubio wrote to Secretary Kerry, urging him to "clearly speak out against this recent decision by the NPCSC and to work with your Chinese counterparts to ensure that Beijing does not further limit Hong Kong's promised autonomy and its ability to move toward full democracy..." Senator Menendez wrote to Chief Executive Leung, calling on him to "exercise your leadership to guarantee your citizens, the people of Hong Kong, receive the full democratic rights and freedoms that they have been promised and which they deserve."

What to Expect

It is uncertain how much longer the demonstrations will continue, or if and when the Hong Kong police will attempt to disperse the protestors and dismantle their camps. Each instance in which police have tried to do so appears to have rallied popular support for the protesters and increased the number of people at each protest site. It is also unclear if the October 21 talks will provide the basis for the end of the demonstrations. The Hong Kong government's perceived inflexibility regarding the NPCSC's decision and its efforts to break up the demonstrations had led the HKFS and Scholarism to doubt Chief Executive Leung's sincerity. Similarly, the Hong Kong government questions the willingness or ability of the student leadership to end the demonstrations, regardless of the results of the talks.

More Information

For more information see CRS Reports: *China's Leaders Quash Hong Kong's Hopes for Democratic Election Reforms* (IN10146); *Hong Kong's Summer for Democracy?* (IN10114); *Prospects for Democracy in Hong Kong: The 2012 Election Reforms* (R40992); and *Prospects for Democracy in Hong Kong: China's December 2007 Decision* (RS22787).

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