

Mass Protests Continue in Hong Kong

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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Thousands of protesters remained on the streets of central Hong Kong overnight in anticipation of far larger demonstrations today, China's National Day—a holiday in both Hong Kong and mainland China. The protests have already drawn in tens of thousands during recent days to demand the resignation of Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying and open elections for his post in 2017.

The immediate trigger for the protests was last month's announcement by China's National People's Congress that the 2017 election, while under a new system of universal suffrage, would be restricted to candidates vetted by a nomination committee stacked with pro-Beijing appointees. The decision was widely regarded as a breach of the promise of a fully-elected chief executive by 2017, made when China took over the former British colony in 1997. Currently the chief executive is chosen by a 1,200-member committee dominated by Beijing loyalists.

Opposition legislators from the broad grouping known as the pan-Democrats criticised the plan and threatened to veto it in Hong Kong's Legislative Council. Occupy Central, an organisation founded last year by a collection of academics, church leaders and professions, announced a civil disobedience campaign that was due to start today to force Beijing to withdraw its decision. These parties and groups represent layers of the Hong Kong elites who, while concerned that Beijing's control will undermine their interests, are even more fearful of a mass movement of the working class that could destabilise bourgeois rule.

The cautious approach of the pan-Democrats and Occupy Central, holding out for a compromise with Beijing, was pre-empted when the Hong Kong Federation of Students and other student organisations called for a boycott of classes and protests last week. Clashes between students and police outside the government headquarters on Friday provoked larger demonstrations over the weekend. The Hong Kong administration attempted to break up the protests using riot police, but failed.



Image: The protest in Hong Kong [Credit: FlickrUser Pasu Au Yeng]

A tense standoff continues after riot police were withdrawn from the protest sites on Monday. Chief Executive Leung has refused to resign, declaring that Beijing will not back down from its election plan and urging Occupy Central leaders to call off the protests. He pointed out that the “Occupy Central founders had said repeatedly that if the movement is getting out of control, they would call for it to stop.”

Occupy Central, however, only stepped into the protests late Saturday. Its leaders, along with various pan-Democrats, are clearly seeking to bring the rather heterogeneous movement under its control, but their influence, particularly over younger layers of protesters, is far from certain. The diffuse and confused political character of the protests is reflected in their limited demands, along with their vague slogans of “democracy” and chants of “love Hong Kong” and “we want a real vote.”

At this stage, the involvement of the working class appears to be limited. A call by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, which is aligned with the pan-Democrats, for a general strike yesterday went largely unheeded. Some teachers and social workers stopped work, according to the *South China Morning Post*. On Monday, about 200 workers from a Coca-Cola distributor walked out.



Image: Protest outside government headquarters

Nevertheless, the opposition is being fuelled by broader democratic and social concerns that reflect the deepening social divide in Hong Kong. The *New York Times* yesterday noted that polls over the past year indicated that

“the most disaffected and potentially volatile sector of Hong Kong society is not the students, the middle-aged veterans or even the elderly activists who have sustained the democracy movement for decades. Instead, the most strident calls for greater democracy—and often for greater economic populism, as well—have come from people in the 20s and early 30s who have struggled to find well-paying jobs as the local manufacturing sector has withered away, and as banks and other service industries have hired mainland Chinese instead of local college graduates.”

Hong Kong analyst Michael DeGolyer told the *New York Times* that these layers paid more attention to student leaders than Occupy Central or the pan-Democrats. “There’s a large number of people who are disaffected and alienated who are not students, who are not affiliated with any political party and who are angry,” he said.

Beijing is deeply concerned that the protests in Hong Kong could spiral out of control and spark unrest in the Chinese mainland amid a deepening economic slowdown and rising social tensions. Beijing has heavily censored news in the Chinese media and on the Internet about the protests and could resort to force to suppress the opposition in Hong Kong.

To date, Chinese authorities have adopted a cautious attitude, leaving the public handling of the situation to the Hong Kong administration and hoping that the protests will fizzle out. An editorial in yesterday’s state-run *Global Times* dismissed the demonstrations as “merely noise” and predicted that “tide will turn against the oppositionists” once Hong Kong people see that “the Central government will not change its mind.”

A more strident tone was sounded by the official *People’s Daily* on Monday. It denounced pro-democracy leaders who sought support from “anti-China forces” in Britain and the US,

raising the spectre of a US-engineered colour revolution in Hong Kong. However, the protest movement bears none of the hallmarks of the putsch engineered and financed by the US and Germany in February to oust elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. The carefully-staged, anti-Yanukovich protests in Kiev, which were dominated by extreme right-wing and fascist organisations, had no democratic content whatsoever.

At present, the response of the US and Britain to the events in Hong Kong is decidedly low key by comparison to mind-numbing deluge of anti-Russian propaganda that accompanied the Kiev coup. In comments on Monday, White House press secretary Josh Earnest declared that the US was “closely watching the situation in Hong Kong” and appealed to local authorities to “exercise restraint.” British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg called for a meeting with the Chinese ambassador to express his “dismay and alarm” over the situation.

While the Ukrainian coup was aimed at integrating Ukraine into the European Union and imposing drastic austerity measures, the US appears to be more concerned at present with preserving the status quo in Hong Kong. Assuming the bogus mantle of defending democracy in Hong Kong, Earnest said: “We believe that an open society with the highest possible degree of autonomy and governed by the rule of law is essential for Hong Kong’s stability and prosperity.”

That is not to say that the US and Britain will not be using their close ties with elements in the Hong Kong political and corporate elite to try to exploit the protests for their own advantage. As part of its “pivot to Asia”, the Obama administration has mounted a concerted diplomatic offensive throughout the region to undermine China’s influence.

The danger that the major powers could manipulate the pro-democracy demonstrations arises from the present confusion and lack of political perspective. While the protesters are hostile to the police-state methods of the Chinese regime, they must also oppose any intervention by imperialism. The US and its allies are certainly no defenders of democratic rights—either at home, or in their brazen interventions and wars around the globe. A genuine struggle for democratic rights is completely bound up with the development of an independent movement of the working class in Hong Kong, China and internationally in the struggle for socialist internationalism.

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