

“To Catch Crabs on a Hill”: Hong Kong in Review 2020

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John Menadue's Blog, Pearls & Irritations, 14 December 2020

Link: <https://johnmenadue.com/to-catch-crabs-on-a-hill-hong-kong-in-review-2020/>

“To catch crabs on a hill” is a Cantonese expression meaning something almost impossible. Hong Kong’s prospects are as bleak as that, but it would be a mistake to write the territory off completely. There is a dynamism in local culture, reflected in its pithy proverbs, that may yet save the day.

Events in Hong Kong during 2020 cannot be understood without recapping the history of 2019 when local people rejected a proposed extradition treaty, fearing that, if it were passed, anyone found guilty could be deported to the mainland and sentenced under mainland law. Hundreds of thousands marched. Unfortunately, a small group sacked the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the representative office of the national government, so protests became no longer a matter of purely local concern. China’s sovereignty had been called into question, but for a while Beijing relied on Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive, to resolve matters.

The withdrawal of the extradition treaty did not satisfy the protestors. They expanded their demands to five: an independent investigation into police brutality, amnesty for all arrested, retraction of the characterisation of the protests as “riots” and the resignation of the Chief Executive. Protests expanded. District elections in November 2019 showed a deep rift between pro- and anti-government forces with opposition candidates winning 392 out of 452 seats.

Some groups called for independence or for restoration of British rule, neither of which has ever been an option. Hong Kong’s Basic Law opens with “the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is an inalienable part of the People’s Republic of China.” Democracy has not been part of Hong Kong’s history either in spite of some earnest efforts made by outgoing British Governor Chris Patten. In fact, the demand for “democracy” by young leaders is vague. It reflects multiple reasons for dissent and for popular distrust of government, including attacks on local language and culture and resentment of mainland people moving to live and work in Hong Kong.

LegCo, which should be responsive to popular opinion, has proved incapable of passing any reforms or finding a middle ground, and the Chief Executive is absolutely constrained by President Xi Jinping’s autocratic centralism. Appointed by a Beijing-backed committee, to quote another cogent Cantonese expression, she is a “two-

headed snake,” serving two masters. The Liaison Office of China’s central government coordinates pro-Beijing groups and political leaders and mobilises patriotic rallies.

Covid-19 overwhelmed China, Hong Kong and then the rest of the world early in 2020 and Hong Kong police banned protests and enforced social distancing rules. Protests died down but did not disappear. The call for democracy won sympathetic support from local and international media. Despite official bans, thousands gathered to observe the June Fourth massacre and to protest the anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty on 1 July. When Beijing passed a national security law for Hong Kong, banning acts of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces. A central government office, established under the terms of this law, has jurisdiction on security cases when referred by the Hong Kong government. Protestors, fearing the worst, called on the US and UK to take action. In response, the US condemned China and announced sanctions on Hong Kong leaders.

Because of the protests and restrictions due to the virus situation, many businesses have closed. Hong Kong’s role as a major transport and finance hub has been affected. Real GDP growth for the year 2020 as a whole [is forecast](#) to sink to – 6.1 percent. Looking ahead, the government predicts that the mainland economy will continue to grow strongly while Hong Kong exports to other markets are likely to be affected by the international Covid-19 situation, China-US relations and other geopolitical tensions. Locally, unemployment has stabilised at 6.4 percent, cushioned to some degree by government relief measures.

On 11 November, China’s National People’s Congress passed a resolution making it possible for Hong Kong to remove lawmakers seen as endangering national security. Four opposition legislators were immediately dis-enfranchised and the remaining 15 opposition members resigned. Addressing a LegCo without any opposition representation, Carrie Lam’s [policy address](#) of 25 November assured residents that Beijing was committed to revive the ailing economy, listing two hundred projects ranging from car parks and dental services to new roles for the Territory in the “Greater Bay Area” development plan (for the Pearl River Delta). Cooperation with the mainland would be deepened with new joint trading schemes between stock exchanges, mainland investment in local technology firms and Hong Kong investment in the Zhuhai Airport. She did not, however, address the need to mend political rifts in the community and rebuild relations between the government and the opposition.

These budget measures cannot achieve Lam’s announced goal of “restoring people’s confidence.” The Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute’s [latest survey](#) reveals Carrie Lam’s popularity rating is 33.5 percent and satisfaction rating of all main

government policies is negative. Popular protests will continue and will evolve in the face of increasingly heavy-handed government action. There may be no sympathetic leadership and no popular parliamentary representation in Hong Kong, but people's spirits remain high. There is after all a local saying, "When the horse dies, you get off and walk."

The above article has been submitted to the East Asia Forum at the Australian National University for inclusion in their 2020 Annual Review.

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