

Why Beijing wins

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David Zweig says violence bolsters the narrative that one-party rule is the key to prosperity

While Hong Kong's political crisis is often seen as a major challenge to China's leaders, a recent trip to Hunan province has brought home to me Beijing's adeptness at turning the situation to its advantage.

Given the Communist Party's tight control over the media behind the Great Firewall, the Hong Kong narrative the party has created in the hearts and minds of mainlanders is basically: thank goodness I don't live there.

In fact, the violence in Hong Kong benefits Beijing. Generally, when I explained to mainlanders how Hongkongers want to defend the freedoms guaranteed by the Basic Law against the political tightening that has intensified since 2012, they understood. They, too, have felt the state's increasingly heavy hand since then.

But, to a man, when they heard I was from Hong Kong, they were quick to articulate their opposition to the chaos perpetrated by the protesters on the streets, decrying the impact it would have on the city's economic growth.

One common view among Western social scientists is that Chinese people believe that whenever central authority weakens, chaos follows closely behind. Whether or not this view is truly part of Chinese political culture's DNA, the Communist Party has played it up to promote the argument that unity and stability under party leadership have provided a foundation for China's economic advances in the past 40 years.

On the other hand, excessive democracy or unbridled freedom, as seen in Hong Kong, Taiwan and even the United States, would only bring political instability and economic decline in today's China. Reflecting on the past two decades, one interlocutor in Hunan argued that the party's greatest strength was its ability to organise society around a concerted drive for rapid growth, a view validated by the economic miracle in China.

A Hong Kong with a vibrant democracy and thriving economy would be a direct challenge to the party

Members of the older generation with whom I spoke see the current situation in Hong Kong through the lens of their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. More precisely, they see the Hong Kong protesters who are hurling Molotov cocktails, trashing MTR stations and setting fire to China-linked business establishments as reincarnations of the Red Guards who, in paroxysms of irrational violence in the 1960s, beat innocent people, killed each other in factional fights, and rejected all compromise in the name of what they upheld as sacred principles.

A 65-year-old man who has lived abroad for many years could relate to Hongkongers marching to defend their rights. But all his understanding and support melted away in the face of video footage of the gratuitous violence in the city. Young people share a similar concern about chaos, not because they fear the re-emergence of the violence of the Mao era, of which they know almost nothing, but because they accept the party's argument that its emphasis on political order is the driver of their current economic well-being.

When they look at Hong Kong and the ongoing economic downturn, they accept the argument that they must curb their own desire for greater freedom and democracy if they want their lives to keep improving.

Democracies manage this tension between social chaos and state control through a host of mediating institutions, such as free and fair elections, a real parliament that has policymaking capabilities, an independent judiciary that has the teeth to challenge the state and the police, and many other trappings of constitutional democracy, such as freedoms of speech and assembly.

These are the precise institutions—a free press, an independent judiciary which affords citizens fair trials, the right to elect a parliament and leader through a free and open process—that pro-democracy forces here in Hong Kong are fighting to preserve if not expand. And these are the same institutions whose curtailment by Beijing has helped foment the current crisis.

China's leaders, particularly since the mid-2000s, have worked assiduously to

prevent the emergence of civil society organisations and the mediating political and legal institutions which are anathema to Beijing's monopoly on power.

In fact, leaders have continually rejected political reform since the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. More recently, they have posited the party as the only acceptable linkage between state and society.

In fact, with regard to the pro-market reform document from the third plenum of the party committee in 2013, the only political institution that garnered the party's support was China's historic petitioning system, whose success rate for challenging local officials was only one in a thousand. Little wonder mainland protesters themselves often turn to violence to press their grievances.

So what are the incentives today for Beijing to directly shut down the protests in Hong Kong? I would argue that a well-developed and smoothly functioning political system in this city threatens Communist Party rule much more than the current unrest: hence its desire to push Hong Kong closer to "one country" and undermine the positive features of "two systems".

A Hong Kong with a vibrant democracy and a thriving economy would be a direct challenge to the party and its justification for one-party rule. But when we in Hong Kong reject our own institutions and the rule of law, and resort to extralegal behaviour, the only real winner is the leadership in the North.

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