

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF RECENT PROTESTS IN HONG KONG

A 'Highly Problematic' Democracy?

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Designed to oversee a peaceful transition from British to Chinese rule in Hong Kong, the 1984 Sino-British 'Joint Declaration' declared that existing 'rights and freedoms... will be ensured by law' . This was put into more formal terms when, in 1990, Beijing ratified Hong Kong's 'Basic Law' (the region's post-handover mini constitution) . With these agreements in place, the foundation was laid for the development of democratic principles in Hong Kong. Yet in September this year, newspapers described the clashes which took place between waves of pro-democracy protestors and a combination of police and anti-democracy protestors in the region's Admiralty district . The decision of the Beijing government to 'screen' candidates for Hong Kong's 2017 elections – the first in the region to elect a leader based on universal suffrage – provoked hostility among those wanting to choose their own leader with no restrictions . With a basic democratic right thus deemed violated, the stage was set for one of the most severe sights of civil disruption in Asia since the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989. Yet how – and why, given the implementation of the aforementioned



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One of the key questions prompted by the current unrest in Hong Kong is how far the laws and agreements drawn up ahead of its transfer to Chinese ownership in 1997 have contributed to the discontent. A speech delivered at Chatham House by Hong Kong politician Maria Wai-Chu Tam sheds light on this factor. Speaking during the formation of the Basic Law, which was designed to implement a two-way system of government between China and Hong Kong, Tam examined some of the critical issues underpinning the Law's passage. Revealingly, she draws the audience's attention to the 'grey areas' which exist in the Basic Law, which she calls to be 'clarified in our favour' before being officially enshrined . In particular, she advocates a clear system of election for Hong Kong's governance. Indeed, Tam attaches great significance to autonomy in Hong Kong; she believes it to be 'terribly important' that a democratic system is put in place in Hong Kong free of 'outside force, including China' . In light of the current protests, which some have seen as a direct consequence of Beijing's interference in Hong Kong politics, Tam's comments carry particular weight . They suggest that the vagueness of the Basic Law contributed significantly to the instability underlying the recent clashes.

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agreements – has this been able to occur? Scrutinising a variety of documents in the *Chatham House Online Archive* offers some revealing insights into the apparent political instability in Hong Kong today.

However, this 'mini constitution' was the product of two countries' negotiations – Britain and China – whose roles have been examined in an attempt to draw conclusions upon the reasons for continued political instability in Hong

Kong. Taking first Britain, it was accused by John Gittings in his 1998 *The World Today* article of not doing enough to ensure the maintenance of democratic principles in the region following its handover to China. He claimed that Hong Kong essentially became a minor interest in British foreign policy from 1992, foregoing its part in the Joint Declaration . As a result of its ambivalence towards Hong Kong, Britain severely risked impeding the development of democratic principles in the region, potentially exposing it to Chinese domination .

Yet not all agree that Britain can be blamed for its role here. It has been suggested elsewhere that China's attitude from the outset was so set against allowing egalitarian principles to flourish in Hong Kong that British policy would have made little difference. Indeed, this may account for Robin Porter's comments at a Chatham House conference following the official handover of Hong Kong to Chinese government in 1997. He forecasted that democratic principles were unlikely to last in Hong Kong given 'China's record to date' . Regardless of the Basic Law's stipulation of the 'one country, two systems' model of government, Porter felt that China would find interference in Hong Kong's political affairs difficult to resist. Underlying this view is the implication that it was the attitude of China, rather than merely the wording of any documentation, which was the greatest danger to democratic freedom in Hong Kong. This implication is strengthened by an article published in the *International Affairs* journal, in which Joseph Cheng evidences the general reluctance of China to engage with democracy. Even before its supposed ratification of the Basic Law, there was

little optimism in Hong Kong that China would allow unimpeded administration of Hong Kong .

Thus far, the sources analysed from *Chatham House Online Archive* point towards external factors behind the ongoing struggle for democracy in Hong Kong. But it should be remembered, finally, that support for democracy in Hong Kong today is far from universal in the region – and further documents suggest that it never has been . As Cheng also highlighted in his article, a sense of powerlessness among the 'small group of intellectuals' supporting democracy in the late-1980s hindered the democratic process. By 2000, there were some – mainly businessmen – who supported efficiency over democracy, fearing the economic impact of 'grass-roots' politicians preoccupied with welfare provision . Considering the recent protests in Hong Kong, it seems that this social division has persisted.

Taken together, the sources investigated point to the importance of addressing the question of Hong Kong's 'highly problematic' democracy from a variety of perspectives . While several of the documents analysed advocate failures in the legal apparatus from the very outset – leaving ambiguities in how Hong Kong should be governed – there is still a sense that there have been sufficient reservations among the population to prevent the evolution of democracy in the region. This may deter any simplistic conclusion upon the reasons behind the recent protests for greater freedom in Hong Kong. As *Chatham House Online Archive* has indicated, this is a heavily contested process with no simple resolution. 

Read and view extracts from referenced *Chatham House Online Archive* articles

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