

Democracy in Hong Kong: What's Wrong With Now?

By Anson Chan

It will always be fashionable, in some quarters, to be negative about democracy. Democracy is not always a wise nor perfect form of government.

WHEN IT WORKS WELL, HOWEVER, democracy gives expression to the finest qualities of idealism and public service, but by its very nature, it is also vulnerable to human frailty. The crucial point is that a democracy is the only form of government that can be truly accountable to the people in whose name it governs. Democracy offers a fair and equal opportunity for every citizen to have a say in the selection of those who wield political power over them. Democracy maximizes the kind of civic participation that can ultimately stand the test of time.

Hong Kong is not just one of the most sophisticated and economically successful cities in the world; it is also home to an open, generally law-abiding and well-ordered society. Where else do you see, (as we do year after year on the July 1 anniversary of the hand-over) tens of thousands of ordinary citizens marching peacefully in support of universal suffrage, with no ugly confrontations with the police, no vandalism, no threat whatsoever to law and order?

Hong Kong people cherish the rights and freedoms provided in law. They are also aware of the constraints imposed by the “one country, two systems” concept. They have demonstrated, time and again, that they can and will exercise their rights and freedoms prudently. Why then are there still so many voices in our community arguing that Hong Kong people are not ready to elect their head of government and all members of their legislature by full universal suffrage, especially given that these rights are promised to them in their constitution, known as the Basic Law?

I believe there are three main reasons. First, after a century and a half of largely benign, but inevitably paternalistic, colonial rule many Hong Kong people have grown accustomed to being governed by bureaucrats. Civil servants are a

known quantity, politicians are not. Secondly, there remain powerful vested interests within the community, notably in business circles, who fear creeping welfarism and a potential loss of influence on government policy-making. Their lobbyists still have the ear of top government officials, both in Hong Kong and Beijing. Last but not least, there is the growing influence of the so-called “pro-Beijing” lobby, in all its different manifestations. These groups will always take their cue from what they perceive to be the Central Government’s position. For the time being at least, this combines distrust of the tactics and policies of the Hong Kong democratic camp with

“Hong Kong is noted for its high degree of internationalization, its business friendly environment, the rule of law, free trade and free flow of information, open and fair competition, its well-established and comprehensive financial network, a superb transport and communications infrastructure, sophisticated support services and a well-educated workforce complemented by a pool of efficient and enterprising entrepreneurs.”

If you add to the above, stable and corruption-free government, a high degree of social cohesion and relatively low levels of crime you begin to ask, quite justifiably, what could possibly be wrong with democracy now?

Attainment of full universal suffrage is not, in itself, a final destination. But it is a vital first step along the road to democratically based, sustainable good governance.

concern at the unsettling effect which greater democracy in Hong Kong might have on Mainland China’s political system.

Since I began to speak out more publicly on the issue of universal suffrage just over a year ago, I have persistently challenged those who argue that Hong Kong people are not ready for democracy — that our society is not yet mature enough and so on — to state clearly why they think this is so. I have yet to receive what I consider to be a cogent response.

On the other hand, arguments as to why Hong Kong is more than ready for democracy abound and, indeed, could not be better expressed than in an extract taken from the Government’s most recent annual yearbook:

It is true that our political party system is relatively immature and still evolving, but to use this as a reason for not moving forward is ultimately self-defeating. We are in an archetypal chicken-and-egg situation. Hong Kong will only succeed in grooming the political talent it needs when individuals with the appropriate motivation, skills and desire to serve the community can see a realistic possibility of being able, once elected, to exercise genuine influence on the way the city is governed.

Attainment of full universal suffrage is not, in itself, a final destination. But it is a vital first step along the road to democratically based, sustainable good governance — and the sooner we take that first step the better. Indeed, there is

a strong argument for taking the first step now while the going is good.

There is no doubt that a fair measure of blame for the current lack of strong democratic institutions in Hong Kong can be laid at the door of the former British administration, who were far too cautious in the decades prior to the return of sovereignty in 1997. There were reasons for this, including constraints on the ability of the British side, after the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1984, to initiate further constitutional reforms without the blessing of Beijing. Nevertheless, more could and should have been achieved when the chance was there.

The return of sovereignty in 1997 and the promise that a “high degree of autonomy” would be given to the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) should have injected new impetus into the democratization process. After all, the Basic Law spells out clearly that the ultimate goal is election of the SAR Chief Executive and all members of the legislature by means of universal suffrage. The sad fact is that basically no progress has been made on democratic reform in the 10 years since the handover.

On the contrary, far from building up the confidence of Hong Kong people in their ability to play a stronger role in shaping their own form of governance, successive administrations have shied away from the task of determining a long-term roadmap and timetable for universal suffrage. In the meantime, pronouncements by self-styled “guardians” of the Basic Law and successive Basic Law Interpretations and Decisions by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, have generated a growing list of principles and pre-requisites which must be observed, or fulfilled, before Hong Kong people will be deemed ready for universal suffrage.

There is no doubt that a fair measure of blame for the current lack of strong democratic institutions in Hong Kong can be laid at the door of the former British administration, who were far too cautious in the decades prior to the return of sovereignty in 1997.

The government's much anticipated consultation document — the so-called Green Paper on Constitutional Development, published in July 2007 — does finally purport to lay out models for the election of the Chief Executive and all members of the legislature by universal suffrage, together with possible roadmaps and timetables for getting there. Unfortunately, so many options and permutations of these options are put forward, that the ordinary reader is left bewildered as to how to respond.

To make matters worse, discussion of all these options is prefaced by a chapter devoted entirely to setting out the “principles of design of the political structure,” the real purpose of which is clearly to dampen public expectations that the outcome of the consultation exercise will signal any rapid progress towards more democratic government. For example, paragraph 2.08 of the Green Paper states: “Given the ... constitutional status of the HKSAR, the Central Authorities have the constitutional powers and responsibilities to determine the model of political structure of the HKSAR.” Small wonder that the public has received the Green Paper's publication — for the most part — with resigned indifference. Hong Kong people can see the writing on the wall and it says that their wishes will not be the deciding factor.

Hong Kong people want democracy, not for its own sake but because they understand it is a basic prerequisite to good, transparent and accountable governance. A recent public opinion survey, conducted by the Hong Kong Baptist University Transition Project, revealed that nearly 50% of respondents thought that current government policy is not fair to all sectors of the community. Also, 68% felt that direct election of the Chief Executive would result in government policies which are more fair and responsive to

the needs of all sectors of the community; 64% were in favor of electing all members of the legislature by universal suffrage at the time of the 2012 Legislative Council elections.

I know that many Hong Kong people are tired of trying to swim against the tide, especially when that tide seems to be getting stronger. As a community, we must sustain belief not just in our ability, but in our right, to press strongly and fearlessly for more democratic government. For my part, I will continue to do whatever I can to strengthen public understanding of the issues in the Green Paper, to stimulate active engagement by the community in the current debate and to work for the broad consensus needed to achieve, at the earliest possible time, the democratic reforms that Hong Kong people so richly deserve.

Anson Chan served as the head of the Hong Kong civil service and Chief Secretary, the No. 2 post in government, to the last British Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, and to the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Tung Chee-hwa, after the handover in 1997.