

## **Politics: Hong Kong style**

[Tsang Shu-ki](#) (9/5/04)

*From benign neglect to showdown as a last resort*

When Beijing started the initiative to interpret HK's political developments in the context of the Basic Law, I characterised at one point the change in the central government's stance towards the SAR as one from "benign neglect" to "benign intervention". That characterisation itself now appears "benign", albeit perhaps still relevant.

Elections by universal suffrage in 2007 and 2008 served as a "working hypothesis" in most local discourse. (Why not? Even the NPC Standing Committee formally rejected the idea in its decision, and hence must have considered it.) However, most of the academic and political friends with whom I had the opportunities to communicate were sufficiently pragmatic. We actually deliberated about various forms of democratic adjustments over a longer horizon. Floated transitional ideas included "compromises" such as turning the electoral college into a kind of nomination committee and allowing the HK population to vote on its nominees as the CE; and having more (but not 100%) directly elected seats in the LegCo, etc. There were no detailed agreements, and some insisted on full elections. But most acted in good faith and on the assumption that the central government remained open-minded about the future.

Then the SARG submitted a report with heretofore-unseen efficiency, and the Standing Committee of NPC revealed a ruling with restrictive details, rather than just on general principles. Most of my friends were surprised, except a few who claimed to have anticipated the results. In reaction, "democrats" declared the end of democracy, as they did about the "end of Hong Kong as a free society" just before the 1997 transition. Some academics became crestfallen, one or two openly wept, while a talk show host took a long leave to ventilate his frustrations.

I did not anticipate that things would so turn out, and turn out in such a way so soon. I was disappointed. As I said [earlier](#), the process is also important, not just the outcome. (People care about what Bruno Frey et al. refer to as "[procedural utility](#)": not only what, but also how matters.) I thought that the central government would have been more relaxed in dealing with the relatively low-risk SAR and would have probed

more carefully into the political malady that has been festering in HK.

Nevertheless, despite (or because of) the highly peaceful and civilised July 1 Rally, and despite (or because of) the messages of the District Board Elections late last year, the central government decided to take the politically expedient way of damage control: i.e. to have a “showdown” asap. Top officials made clear that the decision was the “last resort”, given the deteriorating situation in the SAR.

### *An asymmetric “game”*

There is no doubting who will “win” in such a “showdown”. Although the decisions were largely unexpected, their consequences are not. No revolt, violent reactions, or Korean-style protest suicides have occurred; and the largest demonstration so far managed to mobilize less than 10,000 (according to consultants hired by the SARG).

In any case, I don’t think it is the end of democracy in HK, or the beginning of troubles locally (we are already deep into troubles, not all of which are political in nature). I am not sad enough to shed tears. Nor do I feel so frustrated as to shut up.

There is still a good deal of room for reforms in HK’s polity, some say. And the pendulum will swing back, as the central government may become more accommodative now that it has set its rules and feels more assured. Let’s hope so. And I am all for continuing dialogue. But I also respect those friends of mine who have been practicing “noisy opposition”, “civil disobedience” or “nonviolent resistance” to express their political beliefs. (My only reservation is that some of them have turned their practices more or less into shows and set pieces while doing little else.) Boycotts, including partial, temporary and conditional boycotts, are legitimate ways of signalling dissent in an open society, even if not achieving observable results in the short run. Authorities and critics should get used to them.

### *Rethinking “democratic reversion”*

Moreover, I think we need to rethink about the idea of “democratic reversion” (民主回歸) in the new context of politics and economics inside and outside the SAR. The idea was developed more than 20 years ago in support of China’s resumption of sovereignty over the colony (see for example [my 1982 article](#) in Chinese). Regarding the aspect of “democratisation”, it was based on two key considerations: (1) HK’s “demonstration effect” towards Taiwan; (2) HK’s functions in and contributions to

China's reforms. Both factors have been undermined rather substantially in the past decade, given developments in the Mainland, Taiwan and the SAR itself, particularly as we have been squandering quite a lot of our own economic and political assets.

So what does "democratic reversion" mean now? Should we turn more humble and restrained (because we have less leverage)? Or become more expressive (because we have less to lose and China is more open)? How should a "loyal opposition" behave from now on? Is civil disobedience a desirable and feasible strategy in an asymmetric, dynamic game (in a game-theoretic, not playful, sense)? What are the political obligations of citizens in HK as part of China? How could they be complied wisely?

Quite a bit of soul searching to do. We need to continue to talk, but let's clear our own mind first as a preparation for meaningful discussion.