

Is HK democracy to be feared?

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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In January, five opposition legislators representing the five major electoral districts in Hong Kong resigned, triggering special elections scheduled for May 16. Frustrated by the lack of democratic development and interference from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Hong Kong's political affairs, the opposition parties are hoping to turn the special by-election into a de facto referendum on democratic reform.

Beijing condemned the resignations, describing the planned referendum as a challenge to its authority. Most of the parties with ties to the CCP — such as the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, the Liberal Party and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions — have let it be known they will boycott the elections.

Beijing turned up the rhetoric at the weekend, when Peng Qinghua (彭清華), head of China's liaison office in the territory, suggested to Hong Kong delegates on the sidelines of the National People's Congress in Beijing that the referendum plan somehow threatens social stability.

"This is a total violation of mainstream public opinion, which demands stability, harmony and development," he said.

Former Hong Kong legislator Rita Fan (樊瑛瑛), who is now a member of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, has called the referendum campaign a "farce" and a waste of taxpayer dollars.

It is ironic that Peng chose to apply the same language used in China to justify a lack of democracy — "stability, harmony and development" — to a rich and stable enclave of 7 million people. While a case could be made that such a focus is necessary when a country is still developing — and there is no doubt that, for the most part, China remains a developing country — this rationalization can hardly be applied to Hong Kong.

Equally ironic is that Beijing and the parties it backs in Hong Kong presume to somehow know "mainstream public opinion" before a referendum has been held, preferring to deride as "farce" and boycott a tool that would allow them to truly gauge public opinion.

Hong Kong has a mature enough political system for its people to know what they want. Beijing does not want such ideas to be aired publicly, not because it knows what's best for Hong Kong residents, but because it considers those ideas dangerous. It's not that Beijing fears chaos would erupt if universal suffrage were introduced in Hong Kong. What it fears is "contamination," that once given voice such ideas — or demand for them — would spread like a brushfire into China proper. It wants to keep the democratic genie safely in the bottle.

This sends an important signal to Taiwan at a time when President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration is seeking to foster closer relations across the Taiwan Strait.

China is not changing to accommodate Hong Kong, as many believed it would pre-1997, and it is increasingly difficult to imagine it would behave any differently with Taiwan.

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Hong Kong legislators and their continuing endeavor to bring into being a fully democratic and just Hong Kong in the face of threats and interference from Beijing should be applauded and fully supported.

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