

Hong Kong's freedoms leaking away

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The steady drip, drip, drip coming from Hong Kong these days is the sound of the territory's cherished liberties and freedoms slowly leaking away from multiple taps.

There was a lot of optimism when the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong was signed in December 1984, promising that China's socialist system and policies "shall not be practiced" in the territory and that its capitalist system and lifestyle "shall remain unchanged for 50 years."

Between the signing in 1984, China's National People's Congress adopting the declaration in April 1990 and the Basic Law taking effect on July 1, 1997, doubts arose as to whether Beijing was able or willing to live up to its agreements — an occasional drip, so to speak.

However, since Xi Jinping (习近平) took over as Chinese Communist Party secretary-general in November 2012 and became president in March 2013, the occasional drips have become steady leaks.

The promise of universal suffrage sprang a leak in mid-2014 when it became clear that any offer by Beijing would fall far short of a free choice of candidates and one person, one vote.

Press freedom, which was already under threat from self-censorship and loss of advertising revenue, is also leaking, as evidenced by the violent threats in 2013 against Next Media founder Jimmy Lai (黎智英); the sacking of the chief editor of the Chinese-language Ming Pao in January 2014, followed by a stabbing the following month that put him in hospital; the firebombing of Lai's home and office in January 2015; the abduction and detentions of five men linked to a Hong Kong publishing house and bookstore from October to December that year; and the firing of another Ming Pao editor last year, to name but a few.

Judicial independence has sprung a leak, as shown by court rulings last year and this year that disqualified six pro-independence politicians from the Legislative Council, as well as an appeals court decision in August to jail three leaders of the "Umbrella movement" — Joshua Wong (黃之鋒), Alex Chow (周庭) and Nathan Law (羅冠聰) — for six to eight months.

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Yesterday, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) conceded that her administration was abandoning its rights under Article 154 of the Basic Law to control entry and exit into the territory to Beijing.

Asked on radio whether her government might ban more foreign citizens, two days after UK Conservative Party Human Rights Commission founder Benedict Rogers was on Wednesday refused entry, Lam said that Beijing could block anyone it wanted if it considered their presence in the territory a matter for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Clearly, Beijing's idea that any criticism of its policies is a threat to national security is being extended to Hong Kong.

Taiwanese who want to visit the territory have known this for a long time. From the refusal of a visa to then-Taipei mayor Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) in 2005, reportedly because of his criticism of Beijing's "Anti-Secession" Law, to the last-minute denials of visas to three people invited to a cross-strait forum, including former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) spokesperson Yang Wei-chung (楊偉中), Taiwanese know a visa for the territory cannot be taken for granted.

Lam, in her first policy address, on Wednesday said that Hong Kongers have a duty to stand up for China and the territory has a "duty to nurture our next generation into citizens with a sense of national identity."

The trouble for Lam, and Beijing, is that Hong Kongers increasingly appear to want no part of that national identity.

On Tuesday, Hong Kong soccer fans once again jeered as the Chinese national anthem was played before a match. Such jeering has become increasingly frequent since 2014.

Hong Kong's drips appear to be Beijing's refinement of traditional Chinese water torture techniques.

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