

“Democratization without mainlandization” has become a new catch-all political discourse in Hong Kong, galvanizing a broad coalition of opposition parties to work on a common platform against Beijing-supported candidates in the Legislative Council by-elections on Sunday.

The by-elections were held on the same day Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) consolidated his absolute leadership by eliminating presidential term limits.

The timing might be coincidental, but the low voter turnout shattered the opposition parties’ plan to turn the by-elections into a de facto referendum on China’s growing authoritarian rule in the territory.

Many Hong Kongers stayed home and boycotted the controversial by-elections, and the outcome points to three new trends in local politics.

First, Hong Kongers have been utterly disappointed with the structural hypocrisy of an autocratic system that discriminates against competent candidates who uphold democratic localism.

The entire electoral setup and process was deeply flawed, unfair and shameful for Hong Kong, which was once proudly committed to the rule of law and good government on Chinese soil.

From the beginning, the by-elections were tainted by the Hong Kong government’s screening process that disqualified liberal candidates because of their refusal to show allegiance to the Chinese communist state.

This institutional censorship not only betrayed the principle of self-autonomy within the constitutional framework of “one country, two systems,” but also revealed China’s fear of a highly unpredictable electoral outcome.

HK following in Taiwan's footsteps

Written by Joseph Tse-hei Lee 何志偉

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Beijing strove to undermine the territory's democratic forces. It rallied popular support for top-down autocratic governance, and pressured the Hong Kong authorities to crack down on pro-independence activists and former leaders of the "Umbrella movement."

During the by-election, Beijing's local agents carried out digital electoral mobilization, using fake personas to organize supporters, misleading elderly voters and attacking opponents. Some communist officials from neighboring Guangdong and Fujian provinces even traveled to Hong Kong to campaign for pro-Beijing candidates.

Another effective meddling tactic was a systematic scheme to launch cyberattacks on pro-democracy and pro-independence activists, which illustrates how quickly the use of social media has become a serious political battleground in Hong Kong.

While the global media lamented the Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, China has implemented these manipulative tactics in Hong Kong, confusing the electorate to obtain desirable political outcomes. Rather than liberalizing Hong Kong's post-colonial system, China has intensified efforts to maintain control and rule the territory in a coercive manner.

Second, political indifference and resistance to an unpopular regime are typical tactics used by Hong Kongers to cope with dramatic changes, good or bad.

Angered by China's blatant interference in the territory's domestic affairs, some courageous Hong Kongers have adopted a proactive strategy of resistance that is direct and blunt: They favor candidates with localist ideologies and reject anyone supporting Beijing's nationalistic agenda.

This is still the successful electoral strategy for pro-democracy and pro-independence groups, because they identify themselves with ordinary voters and seize the moral high ground against pro-Beijing politicians.

Third, the future of Hong Kong is closely intertwined with that of China. The latest constitutional amendment cleared the way for Xi to govern for life, although no one could tell how many

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Chinese actually favor a predictable dictatorship over a relatively free and open system.

Knowing the territory would probably live under decades of Xi's rule, some Hong Kongers sent a clear message to Beijing that they refused to succumb to the authoritarian impulses of a single-man, single-party regime.

Democratization is always a long and painful process, and its success hinges on embracing civic, political and religious organizations, and empowering civil society to nurture democratic norms and lifestyles. This has certainly been true for Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwanese and South Koreans made tremendous sacrifices while fighting for freedom and democracy. Their commitment to non-violent activism enabled their nations to achieve a peaceful transfer of power and liberalize their governance structure.

Following in Taiwan's and South Korea's footsteps, Hong Kongers are consolidating their resistance and defending their fundamental rights. They are determined to reap the fruits of their political struggle.

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