

The annual July 1 march took place in Hong Kong on Sunday to mark the 21st anniversary of Britain's handover of the territory to China in 1997. The march, an important barometer of public sentiment in Hong Kong, has suffered from dwindling participation over the past few years, with turnout down again this year. The organizer, the Civil Human Rights Front, said 50,000 people attended, while the police put the figure at 9,800 — either way, they are the lowest figures on record.

The low turnout should not be mistaken as a sign that Hong Kongers are content with the current situation, or as an indication of political apathy. Instead, it is the inevitable consequence of a systematic effort by Beijing to interfere with Hong Kong's domestic affairs and subvert its political and judicial independence, supposedly guaranteed under the Basic Law, the territory's mini-constitution.

Four years after the “Umbrella movement,” the pushback by Hong Kong's pro-democracy activists appears to have come to an end. With Taiwan's nine-in-one elections just around the corner, events in Hong Kong serve as a timely reminder of the bleak future Taiwan would face should its own pro-unification camp ever get its way.

Beijing has exerted its influence over Hong Kong through a puppet government led by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥). In an interview with the Financial Times, Lam gushingly said: “You may say that it's shoe-shining, but I have to say I find [Chinese] President Xi Jinping [習近平] more and more charismatic and admirable.”

The run-up to this year's march was a clear example of meddling by her administration.

First, an application to use Victoria Park as the starting point for the rally was rejected for the second year in a row. The space was instead given to the Hong Kong Celebrations Association, a pro-Beijing organization.

Second, prior to the march, Hong Kong police warned protesters they could be arrested if they joined the march mid-route. It is difficult to explain this away as anything other than a naked attempt by the authorities to intimidate and make it as difficult as possible for members of the

Hong Kong a warning for Taiwanese

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public to participate.

The harassment of law-abiding marchers by the authorities fits a pattern of steadily deteriorating freedoms for the territory's residents. Since the "Umbrella movement," prominent pro-democracy student activists such as Nathan Law (鄧浩賢) and Alex Chow (黃之鋒) have been handed prison terms for unlawful assembly.

Meanwhile, pro-democracy and pro-independence activists were banned from running in the 2016 Hong Kong Legislative Council election or, having contested and successfully won seats, were removed from office on spurious grounds relating to the "improper" taking of their oaths.

Then there are the five employees of a book publisher who were kidnapped by Chinese secret police and detained in China for selling books critical of the Xi regime. Another high-profile activist, Edward Leung (梁耀雄), was last month handed a six-year jail sentence for his involvement in the 2016 Mong Kok "fishball revolution" on trumped-up rioting charges, which prompted criticism from the last governor of the British colony, Chris Patten.

All of this is a far cry from the promises Beijing made before the handover in 1997. Beijing's "one country, two systems" framework was supposed to guarantee Hong Kong's political and economic systems would remain unchanged for 50 years.

At the time, Beijing intended for Hong Kong to serve as a shining model of good governance that could be sold to Taiwanese. Due to the monumental ineptitude and shortsightedness of China's leaders, the reverse is now true and Hong Kong has become a chilling warning to all sane Taiwanese of the disaster that would befall the nation should the pro-China camp ever get its way.

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