

Hong Kong's Moment of Crisis and Failed Promises

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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Hong Kong: Where Promises, Power, and Principles Collide

“A promise made is a debt unpaid,” at least so say the words of the poet Robert W. Service. However, when it comes to certain relationships, and in particular the current one between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong, the Hong Kongers are finding out that with the PRC, there are promises and then there are promises. And some of those latter promises, like unpaid debts, may never be met.

What particular promises are these? Step back in time to July 1, 1997, when Great Britain returned sovereignty over Hong Kong to the PRC and Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China under the framework of “one country, two systems.” The speeches made that day were filled with platitudes, praise and patriotism stressing how great it was for Hong Kong to return to the “Motherland.” Forthcoming were the generous promises from the Motherland that Hong Kong as an SAR would keep its present economic and political systems for the next half-century and that within twenty years the people of Hong Kong could democratically elect their own leaders. It was a festive time; twenty years would be more than enough time for the PRC to work out a system by which Hong Kong could develop and democratically elect its leaders. Or so it seemed.

Time moved on and seventeen years quickly passed, but now with less than three years remaining, Hong Kong is unfortunately no closer to realizing its promised democratic elections than it was back in 1997. This then has become the crux of today’s problem, and a showdown looms in Hong Kong causing all to take sides.

The PRC leadership through the Chinese National People’s Congress has already stated that it is reneging on any promise of free selection and that it alone will determine which candidates are eligible to run and which are not. In effect this means that the people of Hong Kong will have an extremely “limited” slate of two or possibly three candidates from which they can choose their leader. A joke in the streets is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will give the people three choices. Those choices are 1) a person who favors what the CCP wants, 2) a person who really favors what the CCP wants and 3) a person who absolutely favors what the CCP wants.

However, even before the approach of 2017, relationships between the people of Hong Kong

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and China had already turned sour. On several occasions the Hong Kongers have expressed the view that they consider the Chinese as “locusts” who come and devour their land. They drive up the prices of housing; they take up the needed beds in the hospitals as they seek the special privileges given to any children born in Hong Kong. And some have disgusting habits of either spitting or defecating in public. In general, Continental Chinese citizens are not that welcome.

Outside Asia, responses from the United Kingdom (UK) have been varied. Conscious of endangering trade prospects, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office went out of its way to not offend Beijing and declared in a non committal way that there is no “perfect model” for selection of leaders. This obviously did not play well for those seeking democracy in Hong Kong. In contrast, Hong Kong’s last British governor, along with others has stressed the “moral and political” obligations of the CCP to honor their promises.

In Taiwan, a nation with its own hard won struggle for democracy, many activist groups have been watching Hong Kong closely. It is no secret that the one country two systems model was constructed to demonstrate to Taiwanese that this model could easily serve as the basis for some type of unification between Taiwan and China. The Taiwanese groups including the recent Sunflower movement have clearly taken the side of the Hong Kongers who want the democratic choice they were promised. Taiwan’s democracy is having its own problems with its president Ma Ying-jeou who too easily “kowtows” to China.

In the business world, Moody’s Investor Service expressed concern that protests will interfere with the flow of business and weaken Hong Kong’s credit rating; such remarks are the traditional threats and worries from a market place, which is always compliant as long as its ox is not being gored. One man, however, has already felt the bite of business pressure. That is C. K. Chin, a hedge fund manager, whose long-standing column was dropped by the Hong Kong Economic Journal because of his pro-democracy sympathies.

Hong Kong prodemocracy students are planning a boycott of university classes on September 22 as a warning shot indicating that greater protests will follow if their wishes are not heeded; many other pro-democracy activist groups are joining forces with the larger umbrella grassroots group called Occupy Central whose name expresses the penchant for their protests occupying the central business area of Hong Kong. The many perspectives involved in Hong Kong all basically boil down to this one specific point that while promises of democracy were made, the powers and moneyed interests don’t see this in their best interests. This then brings us to the United States a country whose very foundations bespeak democracy. And it is this, which presents a special challenge for the leaders and people of the United States (US). Their country

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is built on the premise that democracy is a basic right of the people. So what will be its stance especially since the US has a big trade deficit with China?

If one looked back at the reason for the US Revolutionary War, from early on in protests like the Boston Tea Party on up to the actual War for Independence, the battle cry of the people was that they were against any form of "taxation without representation." The people wanted the right to both have and choose their representatives. Would the American Revolution have stopped if outside countries had said, "These protests are not in the best interest of world trade."

In Hong Kong, a promise was made but not kept. Is that it, or is there more? Seventeen years is time enough for the adjustments needed to allow for Hong Kong's democratic choices. If the PRC leadership cannot keep its word or promises to its own people in this, how can it then be expected to keep its word in any treaties or agreements made with other countries? Hong Kong's troubles with democracy have implications for all.

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