

HK experience a warning for Taiwan

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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China is nominally a communist state, but it calls its system “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The fact is that China’s economy is more of a free-market economy than many capitalist countries, which is in line with China’s system, where nothing is what it seems. The “democratic system” being implemented in Hong Kong and Macau, with candidates picked by Zhongnanhai for endorsement by the public in elections is another unique system with Chinese characteristics.

When Hong Kong and Macau were returned to China from the UK and Portugal respectively, China promised to implement a “one country, two systems” policy, and late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) famously promised Hong Kongers that its horse racing, dancing and stock markets would continue unchanged for 50 years, but less than 20 years after the handover, Hong Kong is a shadow of its former self.

When the people of Macau “elected” a new chief executive last week, they had all of one person to choose from, Fernando Chui (崔世安), who received 96 percent of the vote. While democracies often see candidates elected with just over 50 percent of the vote, this level of endorsement is ridiculously high. The reason for this extremely high percentage of support was that only 396 electors were allowed to vote — common residents were barred from participating — and for those who have the right to participate, it is difficult to vote against the official candidate. Such efficiency is a rare phenomenon in the democratic world.

It is difficult for Beijing to understand why it cannot use the same electoral system in Hong Kong. After all, both territories are tiny, and both are former colonies. British rule over Hong Kong put a modern, civilized system in place offering freedom, the rule of law, an advanced education system and commerce. In the tug-of-war between a focus on internationalization and on “internalization,” the recognition of the value of internationalization among Hong Kongers far exceeds the attraction of Sinicization.

Hong Kongers are demanding the right to directly elect their chief executive, and the political reform program for Hong Kong announced by the standing committee of the Chinese National People’s Congress gives them the right to choose their leader in a one person, one vote system. However, the threshold for candidates was increased, making it impossible for anyone who has not gained the support of the Chinese government and the local elite to be nominated.

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Disappointed Hong Kongers are now talking about a “birdcage chief executive” and vow to expand the scope of the Occupy Central movement. As far as China is concerned, it is already a major concession to allow general elections to take place, but Hong Kongers do not appreciate this “benevolent gift.” They insist that general elections must follow international standards, and they want to use such universal values to challenge Beijing’s model, forcing Beijing to draw a line in the sand.

Hong Kong and Macau offer harsh lessons for Taiwanese. The “one country, two systems” promise is no guarantee of a bright future. Macau, with its lack of any kind of bargaining chip, cannot stop Beijing from doing as it pleases, and it does not even have the right to say “no.” Hong Kong, while it does have the means to say “no,” cannot get what it wants.

Taiwan has full democracy, the rule of law and economic development, and its standards for democracy and human rights outpace Hong Kong’s and Macau’s by far. Everyone is watching how China deals with Hong Kong, and Taiwan cannot ignore what is going on there. In addition, both the ruling and the opposition parties support Hong Kongers’ demands for the right to choose their chief executive.

The more China suppresses democracy in Hong Kong, the further Taiwan will distance itself from Beijing.

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