

## Hong Kong's 'fishball revolution'

Written by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee 區錦熙

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On Monday last week, the first night of the Year of the Monkey, many Hong Kongers found the streets of the territory on fire, as fighting erupted between local police and hundreds of protesters in a congested section of Mong Kok District.

Taking a stance against gentrification and the displacement of unlicensed food vendors selling Cantonese snacks like fishballs, some community activists urged people to come out and protect the vendors during the Lunar New Year holiday.

When police moved in to clear the unlicensed stalls, some people were knocked down, while others were battered. One police officer fired warning shots and pointed his gun at the crowd. The footage of the incident went viral on the Internet and was aired on TV, provoking an angry crowd to confront the police. Ensuing clashes lasted through the night and police could not regain control of the area until the following day. In the incident's aftermath, more than 60 people were arrested — including dozens of university and high-school students.

Hong Kongers are struggling to make sense of what happened. Those who sympathize with the food vendors and protesters refer to the incident as the “fishball revolution,” comparing it with the 228 Incident in Taiwan in 1947 and the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia in 2011.

However, dismissing public anger toward his leadership, Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying (梁振英) defended the crackdown, saying that the “rioters” were arrested and would be prosecuted in accordance with the Public Order Ordinance — a controversial law that restricts Hong Kongers' freedom of expression and assembly.

In Beijing, officials publicly denounced the Hong Kong Indigenous — an activist group founded by the “Umbrella movement” youth in January last year to oppose the marginalization of Hong Kong — as “a local radical separatist organization” that instigated the Mong Kok unrest.

These conflicting discourses about the clashes reveal worrying trends about the deterioration of public governance in Hong Kong.

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First, there is a convergence of interests between Hong Kong's local government and the Chinese Communist Party leadership in Beijing. Both sides are seeking to maximize their political options and institute an authoritarian government, willing to use any measure necessary to remain in control of the territory, including violence against protesters.

They have launched a systematic smear campaign in preparation for a crackdown on some political fringe groups. They identified a few scapegoats and made an example out of them for the rest of the society. This shows the ruling elite's resolve to seek justification within domestic laws to intimidate civil society and launch a crackdown on dissent prior to large-scale protests.

Second, policing in Hong Kong is intertwined with the autocratic rule. The police has completely abandoned the tradition of neutrality in politics and transformed from a law enforcement agency into an instrument of oppression, ensuring the survival of the Leung administration.

In any crisis in which a Manichean mindset prevails, all involved parties tend to be tense. Frontline police officers and demonstrators are more willing than before to fight each other in a public square. This explains why the government plans to spend millions on water cannon tanks and riot gear for police officers. Without militarizing the police, the rulers cannot keep the frustrated public at bay.

Third, historical transformations often occur in an uneven and sporadic fashion. While the political establishment has demonized the Mong Kok protesters as "angry mobs" or "radical separatists," people should not treat these protesters as a homogeneous entity, because they embody different ideas and grievances. Ever since the end of the Umbrella movement, there have been many popular protests led by the postcolonial youth, who embrace and express a variety of aspirations ranging from direct democracy and freedom from Chinese hegemony, to the protection of the Cantonese culture and the creation of an egalitarian society.

As the battle for democratic localism is being fought on the streets, the meaning of good governance is being contested by young Hong Kongers.

From the Umbrella movement to the fishball revolution, each upheaval is a lesson for future mobilization. By seeing themselves as disenfranchised people and forging alliances with each other, Hong Kongers can prove themselves capable of pushing for progressive change and

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making legitimate demands from their government.

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