

Hong Kong's 'bird-cage democracy'

Written by Joseph Tse-hei Lee 區家豪

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A democratic election should be fair and transparent, and exhibit the element of surprise and unpredictability. This component of an unexpected outcome excites citizens and makes electoral campaigns so appealing. This is certainly true for all elections in Taiwan since the end of the White Terror era (1947 to 1987).

Compared with Taiwan's mature democracy, Hong Kong's chief executive election is nothing more than a "bird-cage democracy." Hong Kong's pro-democracy heavyweight Martin Lee (李柱銘) in the 1990s said that China deliberately excluded liberal democrats such as him and Szeto Wah (司徒華) from the executive leadership after 1997, but still permitted them to serve as a permanent opposition within the Legislative Council.

This strategy worked well for China throughout the 2000s. By coopting a handful of pro-democracy politicians, Beijing claimed the role of benevolent sovereign over Hong Kongers, thereby improving its international image and gaining some legitimacy for the "one country, two systems" policy.

Most importantly, China neutralized the emergence of an indigenous, well-organized political force critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and minimized the spillover effects of Hong Kong's democratic change across the border.

Yet, everything changed with the rise of localism during the months-long sit-in street protests in late 2014, often called the "Umbrella movement."

In the race to become the territory's next chief executive, the competitors exhibited different responses to the growing localist sentiments. Former financial secretary John Tsang Chun-Wah (曾志強) emerged as the most popular candidate in almost all the public opinion polls, but he still lost to Beijing's favorite, former chief secretary for administration Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥).

Although the race was simply a selection process among a small number of pro-Beijing representatives rather than a genuine democratic competition, Tsang's campaign team adapted to the rigid demands of a bird-cage election and staged a series of impressive public rallies aimed at winning the hearts and minds of Hong Kongers.

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Tsang turned out to be better prepared than Lam to conduct electoral campaigning in a pseudo-democracy. His efforts signified a major shift from the battle for winning the support of pro-Beijing politicians behind closed doors to the wider mobilization of all levels of society.

Before 1997, Tsang served as the private secretary to the last British governor, Christopher Patten. This appointment gave him the opportunity to observe and learn from a first-rate English politician, acquiring a deep knowledge of statecraft and realpolitik, and mastering the skills to charm people while hiding one's weaknesses.

Over the past few weeks, Tsang's staff staged and scripted all the campaign performances. They surrounded Tsang with carefully chosen cheerleaders to respond to the effective applause lines and transformed him from a stone-faced bureaucrat to an engaging politician.

Everyone found him likeable, especially when he appeared in casual clothes and interacted with credible community leaders, respectable professionals, and popular Hong Kong filmmakers and movie stars. On many formal occasions, he promoted his policy agendas in easily accessible language and appeared to be listening to the grievances of ordinary people.

This projected an image of charisma and competence, creating a widespread perception that Tsang was never afraid of facing the judgement of the public, and of powerful Beijing masters. It was a new political role that his rival, the staid and uptight Lam, could have never comprehended and assumed.

Despite these strengths, Tsang could never be expected to win this bird-cage election. After all, he was not a Beijing-handpicked candidate like Lam.

The pro-Beijing groupings had a dominant presence in the 1,194-strong Election Committee. The pro-democracy camp only occupied about 300 seats in this body. With this imbalance of power, it was impossible for Tsang to secure a majority.

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Worse still, pledging allegiance to the CCP has been taken as a precondition for becoming a chief executive. Under such pressure, Lam took a hardline stance on the Umbrella protesters in 2014, and denounced the growth of localism as a means to defend Hong Kong's core values.

By comparison, Tsang acknowledged the ever-expanding localist concerns, and tried to channel such energies toward reconciliation with China. He purposefully distanced himself from Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-Ying's (梁振英) hostility toward radical young people and expressed an appreciation for local Cantonese culture. This made him irresistible to Hong Kongers, but a politically suspicious person to Beijing.

Like it or not, Lam is now to become the territory's top leader. She will run a government devoid of legitimacy, and rightfully criticized by most Hong Kongers as socially and morally bankrupt.

Unless her administration forges a new domestic consensus on issues such as democratic governance and cross-border ties with China, it will face more conflict with many competing interests and the territory's civic society in coming years.

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