

Hong Kong police are out of control

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Former British home secretary Robert Peel, credited as the father of modern policing, in 1829 established the Metropolitan Police, the world's first professional police force.

In a force made up of ordinary citizens, police officers nicknamed "bobbies" were expected to adhere to the "Peelian principles," often summarized as "policing by consent." This meant that rather than using fear on the streets of London, "bobbies" had to secure and maintain the approval, respect and affection of the public, an ethos that is still followed. The Hong Kong Police Force of old, modeled on Britain's police force, once adhered to these principles and was considered "Asia's finest."

Unfortunately, the latest violent clashes at the Hong Kong MTR's Prince Edward Station on Saturday evening provide further evidence that Hong Kong police are increasingly using disproportionate violence to quell the unrelenting protest movement that has engulfed the former British colony.

Protesters on Saturday went ahead with a rally in defiance of the police.

A video uploaded to YouTube shows dozens of riot police sprinting down the platform at Prince Edward Station in pursuit of what appears to be a lone protester before tackling him to the ground. Officers then converge on a stationary train, pointing a tear gas gun through the open doors before storming carriages and, seemingly at random, spraying passengers with pepper spray and beating them with batons. A group of passengers is seen huddling in a corner, trying to shield themselves from the police, terrified and sobbing uncontrollably.

On Sunday, pro-democracy lawmakers held a news conference to condemn the use of extreme force.

Hong Kong Legislator Claudia Mo (莫乃光) said: "Hong Kong people are now facing licensed terror attacks not just from the police force, but from the Hong Kong government."

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“What happened on an MTR train at Prince Edward Station was blatantly clear through press footage and photos, and police would still dare to deny ... that [they] were beating up ordinary citizens indiscriminately,” Mo said.

Civic Party Legislator Kwok Ka-ki (郭凱基) accused the police of “shameless behavior unbecoming of monsters.”

Such extreme levels of force being employed by police anywhere in Hong Kong, let alone within its safe and efficient metro rail system, would have seemed unthinkable just a few months ago.

Regrettably, Saturday evening’s carnage was not the first time Hong Kong police have used excessive force in the past few weeks. It follows multiple instances of officers firing rubber bullets, beanbag rounds and tear gas canisters at close range and at head height, targeting protesters.

In one particularly egregious example, a young woman was reportedly hit in the eye with a beanbag round at an anti-government protest outside Tsim Sha Tsui Police Station on Aug. 11. She is still receiving treatment to her shattered right eye, which could be irrecoverably damaged.

Hong Kong police increasingly look and act like a paramilitary outfit. Many officers wear olive-colored, army-style fatigues, instead of blue or black uniforms. The police regularly refuse to grant permission for rallies and last week conducted a dragnet operation, arresting many former student leaders of the 2014 “Umbrella movement” and other high-profile democracy advocates on trumped-up charges.

Following the events of the past few months, many Hong Kongers are understandably questioning whether Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥), who has repeatedly refused to condemn excessive force, has lost control not just of the Hong Kong Police Force, but effectively relinquished control of the territory’s governance to Beijing.

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