

Lam's HK strategy unlikely to be effective

Written by Gray Sergeant
Tuesday, 15 October 2019 04:02

The introduction of emergency powers in Hong Kong show that embattled Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) has listened to at least one of the protesters' cries: jia you (come on, 加油).

Not only does the new law banning face masks at public gatherings curtail Hong Kongers' precious right to protest, but the move looks likely to douse an already fiery situation with generous lashings of gasoline.

Over the past few months, the scenes from Hong Kong beamed around the world have defied the territory's traditional image as a straight-laced commerce hub. Not that this stereotype had much truth to it.

As readers of Antony Dapiran's new book City of Protest will know, Hong Kongers have always been a political bunch. Yet the fallout from an extradition bill that was controversially proposed earlier this year has ushered in a new era of unrest.

The failure of peaceful protest encouraged many in the pro-democracy movement to turn to civil disobedience, and following the failure of these tactics, along with a heavy handed police response, guerrilla-style attacks on property have sporadically begun.

Shops and metro stations have been damaged, while some protesters have even taken to fighting back against the police.

You would have to go back to the 1967 Maoist-inspired riots to find a parallel with what Hong Kong is witnessing now.

Of course, it was those events, more than 50 years ago, that saw similar emergency powers invoked by the then-British colonial administration.

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The big difference today is that those demonstrating are acting out of a deep desire to live in a democracy, rather than on a cult leader's crazed calls for a cultural revolution. Now, the tools of the totalitarians occupy the government offices of Hong Kong, not its streets.

The new restriction introduced by the chief executive might seem minor. For some sitting comfortably in a far-off liberal democracy, the banning of face coverings might even seem reasonable.

Yet hoods, goggles and masks provide vital protection for those on the streets, including the vast majority of peaceful protesters. These items give them physical protection from the police who have been trigger-happy, firing tear gas canisters at crowds.

They also help protect their identities. Remember, it is Beijing and their local lackeys who these demonstrators are up against; showing their faces in public risks their safety and that of their families.

More worrying still, this could well be the start of even more repressive measures, as a number of human rights organizations have speculated.

Under the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, the chief executive can censor the media, seize property and give the police greater powers to arrest, deport and detain. Lam has not ruled out taking further action.

If the past few months have taught us anything, it is that this lady's not for turning. Or rather, her masters back in Beijing have jammed the steering wheel leaving her no choice but to keep tapping on the accelerator.

This uncompromising strategy has not worked so far and, as the thousands rallying to defy the mask ban would indicate, will not work in the future. The crisis in Hong Kong looks set to rumble on.

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