

Many people in Taiwan — and around the world — will be watching Hong Kong tomorrow, where the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) received permission to hold a large-scale demonstration, two weeks after district council elections that delivered a resounding rebuke to Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam's (林鄭月娥) administration — and Beijing.

While CHRF vice convener Eric Lai (賴國河) said the aim was to show Lam that the elections were not the end of the pro-democracy protests, new Hong Kong Police Commissioner Chris Tang (鄧炳强) said that he hoped the demonstration would show the world that Hong Kongers are able to rally “in an orderly and peaceful manner.”

Tang is hopeful that Hong Kongers would listen to him, but a majority of them have made it clear — both at the ballot box and by either taking part in the six months of protests or supporting them — that they want their leaders to pay more heed to them.

Unfortunately, Lam, at a news conference on Tuesday, appeared as deaf to their appeals as she has been all year.

After announcing that her administration would be offering another round of relief measures to help the economy, which last quarter posted its first recession in a decade, Lam said the small-scale clashes between protesters and police last Sunday had thrown cold water on her hopes that the relative peace would hold.

While Lam did not give any specifics about the relief proposals — that was left to Hong Kong Financial Secretary Paul Chan (陳健波) to do the following day, when he announced HK\$4 billion (US\$511.19 million) of measures that include subsidies for small companies to pay their utility bills, and allowing individuals and firms to pay their taxes in installments — she continues to stonewall on the demands that have fueled the protests long after the highly controversial extradition bill was withdrawn and finally dropped.

Instead, she complained about the new US legislation on Hong Kong, saying such interference by “an overseas government” was “most regrettable,” given that the territory has a high degree of freedom in many areas, including freedom of the press, assembly and religion.

Hong Kong: The world is watching

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As ever, she appeared completely oblivious to the fact that it has been China's encroachment on those freedoms — the growing media censorship, extrajudicial abduction of critics from Hong Kong and foreign countries, and its refusal to countenance universal suffrage in the elections for chief executive as well as the Legislative Council — that led to the revolt over the proposed extradition bill.

Despite the economic downturn caused by the protests' impact on tourism as well as the US-China trade spat, many Hong Kongers appear willing to continue protesting until all five of the pro-democracy movement's demands are met: withdrawal of the extradition bill, investigation into allegations of police brutality and misconduct, the release of arrested protesters, a retraction of the government's labeling of the protests as riots and Lam's resignation.

Ironically, it is the willingness of Taiwan's government to listen to protesters that led the South Africa-based civil rights group CIVICUS on Wednesday to list Taiwan as the only truly "open" nation in Asia.

In its latest *People Power Under Attack* report, which rates 193 nations according to their level of freedom of the press, speech and other basic rights, CIVICUS said Taiwan was the only Asian nation out of the 43 in the world in the open category, as it criticized growing censorship and repression in China, India, the Philippines, Brunei, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the narrowing of rights in Japan and South Korea.

In Asia, 95 percent of people live in nations with closed, repressed or obstructed civic space, a CIVICUS official said.

The report, like the protests in Hong Kong, is a sobering reminder of Taiwan's journey toward greater democracy, and how easily the civil rights enjoyed today can be lost tomorrow.

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