

Crowds march for democracy in HK

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Hundreds of thousands of protesters joined the annual 01 July rally from Victoria Park to Central calling for `one person, one vote` and universal suffrage for the 2017 chief executive election, marking the 16th anniversary of Hong Kong`s handover to Chinese rule after 156 years of British administration.

Photo: EPA

Tens of thousands of protesters, some waving British imperial flags and denouncing Chinese "colonists," marched through torrential rain in Hong Kong yesterday to clamor for universal suffrage on the 16th anniversary of the territory`s return to Chinese rule.

Tropical Storm Rumbia brought a drenching and strong winds to the march, now an annual outpouring of discontent directed at both China`s communist government and the semi-autonomous territory`s local leadership.

The parade route from Victoria Park to the skyscrapers of the Central district was a sea of umbrellas and banners bearing slogans that ranged from "Democracy now" to "Down with the Chinese Communist Party."

A handful of marchers scuffled with police, but no major trouble was reported.

China`s national anthem blared as the Chinese and Hong Kong flags were raised outside the harborside Convention Centre to mark the territory`s transfer from British to Chinese rule in 1997.

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A small, but rowdy protest took place near the ceremony with demonstrators burning a photograph of Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying (梁振英), who critics say is guilty of kowtowing to Beijing.

One of the marchers carried a turtle made of balloons to represent Leung, who stands accused of retreating inside his shell whenever trouble strikes.

“The main goal of the rally is to push through for genuine democracy and to ask for Leung Chun-ying to step down,” said Jackie Hung of the Civil Human Rights Front, which organizes the annual march.

The procession came after a survey published by Hong Kong University found that only 33 percent of Hong Kongers take pride in being a Chinese national, the lowest level since 1998.

Leung was appointed by a pro-Beijing committee in July last year, promising to improve governance and uphold the rule of law in the territory of 7 million people.

He is charged with overseeing the transition to universal suffrage to appoint the territory’s chief executive, which was promised by 2017, though critics say little or no progress has been made.

At the Convention Centre ceremony, Leung said implementing universal suffrage was a “major task” for the government, but gave no timetable for public consultations.

Leung also promised to address people’s grievances, which include a widening income gap fuelled by an influx of Chinese wealth.

Hong Kong Chief Secretary of Administration Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) told reporters that the government “will carefully hear the opinions expressed by residents.”

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Police said 33,500 people left for Central from Victoria Park, but Hong Kong media estimated about 50,000.

The poor weather appeared to have dampened turnout from last year's estimated figure of 400,000 protesters, although that was swelled by anger at the presence in town of then-Chinese president Hu Jintao (胡锦涛).

The belief that Beijing meddles in Hong Kong's affairs — with the complicity of the local government — has grown since the handover and is expressed in ironic calls to return the territory to British rule.

The sight of Hong Kong's colonial-era flag at last year's July 1 march incensed commentators in China, but it was out in force again yesterday.

About 40 people from pro and anti-Beijing groups faced off at the People's Liberation Army (PLA) headquarters, exchanging expletives and insults.

The anti-Beijing group held large Hong Kong colonial-era flags, a huge banner of Queen Elizabeth II and played God Save the Queen. They later burned a Chinese People's Liberation Army flag.

Beijing said the ability of Hong Kongers to protest in force proved that the freedoms guaranteed under the handover agreement were alive and well.

"This year, with so many people going on the streets to protest, shows that under the 'one country two systems,' Hong Kong has a lot of freedom and rights," Zhang Xiaoming (张晓明), who heads Beijing's Liaison Office in the territory, told reporters.

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