

OPINION

To end Hong Kong unrest, China must empower city leaders

'One country, two systems' formula can still be salvaged

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While economic inequality has magnified political frustrations in Hong Kong, it is a loss of freedoms that has driven the protests. © Reuters

Two years before China took back control of the city from Britain, U.S. business magazine *Fortune* forecast on its cover that the 1997 handover would be "The death of Hong Kong."

Contrary to the pessimism of the Western media and figures it embraced like local lawyer Martin Lee and Chris Patten, the colony's last British governor, Hong Kong did not die after 1997 nor did its residents flee en masse.

Instead, the city prospered and its population grew while continuing to enjoy civil liberties unheard of in mainland China. Indeed, at the time of the handover, most Hong Kong people were quite proud of China and despite their nervousness about the future, basically loyal to it.

Crucially, China scrupulously honored the terms of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong's future as well as the promises of the Basic Law, the constitutional framework created for the post-handover administration even as Britain dishonored consultation requirements when overhauling the legislature and constructing an expensive new airport.

In my personal experience as a governor of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong and the Business and Professionals Federation, China's top leaders of the time, including President Jiang Zemin and Vice Premier Zhu Rongji, carefully listened to our advice. Meeting with us, they were conspicuously sincere about wanting China's "one country, two systems" formula for governing Hong Kong to work.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin speaks at Hong Kong's handover ceremony on June 30, 1997: China's top leaders, including Jiang, used to listen to advice from Hong Kong's international business community. © Reuters

Indeed, up until recently, it did, notwithstanding occasional stresses. But in the last few years, Beijing has prioritized control over observance of the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law.

In 2015, Chinese security officials detained five Hong Kongers who were publishing embarrassing books about Beijing leaders, with one disappearing from Hong Kong into their custody. Soon after, that genre of books disappeared.

In 2017, Chinese public security officers took businessman Xiao Jianhua from Four Seasons Hong Kong Hotel and brought him across the border. In 2018, a Financial Times editor was refused a new work visa after hosting a speech to foreign journalists by a Hong Kong independence activist.

Suddenly Hong Kong had lost freedom of the press, freedom of speech and the rule of law. For the first time, Beijing had definitively broken its promises to Hong Kong.

Popular frustration and fear built up, but Hong Kong officials did not speak out. A Shanghai leader would have defended his city's core interests. But even though Hong Kong's leaders come from Hong Kong, they have acted as emissaries of Beijing.

The rule of law cannot just mean rule of law except when Beijing feels the urgent need to arrest someone. Freedom of the press and speech don't exist if waived when political leaders face embarrassment.

These are not small things. People accustomed to freedoms have felt deeply betrayed. The Hong Kong government's rushed attempt in June to push through a law to allow the extradition of criminal suspects to the mainland provided an outlet for political frustrations that had been building up since Beijing blocked proposals in 2014 to open up elections to give the public a bigger voice. While economic inequality has magnified the political frustrations, it is the loss of freedoms that has driven the protests.

The extradition bill managed to bring the business community, and even elite civil servants, together with rights activists. Executives were terrified that if they got into a business dispute in China, officials would be able to reach into Hong Kong to grab them.

In responding to repeated demonstrations since June involving millions of residents, officials have doubled down on earlier missteps. Telling businesses like **Cathay Pacific Airways** that they will suffer if their employees verbally support peaceful protests grievously breaches promised free speech.

International companies vulnerable to threats based on their employees' politics will depart the city, ending Hong Kong as we know it. If the police successfully repress the demonstrations by force, frustrations will just rise and protests will recur later.



If the authorities successfully repress the demonstrations by force, frustrations will just rise and protests will recur later. © Reuters

I am conscious that speaking out may earn me powerful enemies. When I criticized Western politicians who were getting Hong Kong wrong, I was denounced as a treasonous "panda hugger." But loving Hong Kong, one speaks forthrightly and seeks a solution.

To resolve the current standoff, China must acknowledge that subordinate officials have made mistakes and recommit to the promises of the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law. That could be embarrassing, but history will remember leaders who are farsighted and able to make difficult decisions wisely. The alternative would be the effective destruction of Hong Kong, which could damage China for decades.

Fundamentally, Hong Kong is not a corporate subsidiary that can be run by a chief executive from the civil service or business. Hong Kong has to be run as a political entity by a political leader chosen with a greater measure of popular influence and empowered to defend the city's interests.

Hong Kong's protesters, too, have to compromise on their principles. To demand everything, or to allow internal disunity to prevent a settlement with the authorities, would be the city's suicide. A wise China would be able to negotiate a settlement that restores confidence and splits the peaceful majority of protesters away from the violent minority who belong in jail.

The alternative is bloody repression that could brand China as a pariah for decades.



William H. Overholt, author of "The Rise of China" and "China's Crisis of Success," lived in Hong Kong for 18 years.

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