

## AN INTERVIEW WITH **PROFESSOR SONNY LO\*\*** : POLITICAL REFLECTIONS IN HONG KONG

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**J**ean-Paul Gagnon: What do you see as Hong Kong's democracy future?

**Professor Sonny Lo:** HK's democratic future depends on two main factors: China's internal democratic changes and Hong Kong's push for democratization. At the moment, the push for internal democratization in Hong Kong has pitted the pan-democratic forces against the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). On the other hand, Beijing as the central government is reluctant to see a Western-style democratic Hong Kong which will be vulnerable to Western influences and become a means through which foreign powers like the United States seek to democratize the mainland. As such, democratization in Hong Kong is now touching upon the bottom line of the central government in Beijing, which remains a largely paternalistic regime although it has become more politically liberalized and plu-

ralistic than ever before. It is very likely that Hong Kong's democratic changes will proceed gradually and at a snail pace, if we use the yardstick of measurement from the viewpoint of Western-style democracies where there are rotations of parties in power and competitive struggle among political leaders for people's votes. Yet, Hong Kong remains the most politically pluralistic society in the PRC as many of its citizens are not only pro-democracy in terms of supporting the direct elections of both the Chief Executive and the entire Legislative Council, but also assertive in making their demands known and criticisms heard. Hong Kong also enjoys a relatively high degree of civil liberties, the rule of law and by and large clean government under the supervision of a respectable anti-corruption agency. Hence, Hong Kong is having a large degree of horizontal accountability, although not vertical accountability in terms of competitive struggle among political

leaders for people's votes, not to mention the possibility of rotation of party in power. However, it must be said that democratization in Hong Kong, and the corresponding resistance from Beijing, illustrate a clash of two political cultures and civilizations, the more Western civilization held by many Hong Kong people and the more Chinese civilization in the psyche of the PRC leaders. As long as the PRC is ruled by a Leninist-style Chinese Communist Party, democratic changes in Hong Kong are bound to be seen as politically dangerous, socially unstable, economically detrimental to the interests of the co-opted pro-Beijing business class, and territorially entailing cross-border impacts on mainland China.

**JPG: Is organized crime a significant obstacle to realizing these democratic goals in HK?**

**SL:** Organized crime does not constitute any obstacle to the realization of democratic goals in Hong Kong. Arguably, some elements of the organized crime even participated in the rescue operations of the student democrats in mainland China shortly after the Tiananmen incident on June 4, 1989. Hence, organized crime in Hong

Kong has been displaying multiple political orientations. On the one hand, it has remained a patriotic force rescuing mainland student democrats from a humanitarian perspective. On the other hand, it has remained an economic interest group trying to enrich its own profits by both legal and illegal means. The leaders of organized crime groups in Hong Kong are also the targets of suppression and co-optation by the PRC authorities. Politically, organized crime has not yet evolved into a political interest group keen to topple any regime in power, in both the mainland and Hong Kong, unlike the triads in the Qing dynasty as they were upholding the banner of overthrowing the Qing dynasty and restoring the Ming dynasty. The PRC government sees organized crime as harmful to its national security interests, and therefore its elements have to be controlled and suppressed. Any attempt by organized crime groups to turn into political interest groups is disallowed, albeit in practice they are economic interest groups thriving in the midst of a whole range of legitimate and illegitimate businesses.

**JPG: Do you think mainland China will impede these democracy developments?**

**SL:** In the long run, Mainland China will democratize but it will change in its own way at its own pace without accepting the pressures from outside. China historically has been affected by foreign pressures, especially foreign humiliation during the Qing dynasty. Therefore, democratic models, if experimented in mainland China, will be basically indigenous without the need to borrow excessively from the West, an attempt that would counter the national pride of the Chinese people. Although Taiwan's political transformations in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s have demonstrated that a Chinese society can democratize along the Western model, mainland China is likely to reject this Western-style democracy. In the first place, the PRC harbors deep suspicions of foreign powers, especially the United States which appear to contain the PRC regime and foster the so-called peaceful evolution. Moreover, the PRC version of democratization entails the strengthening of the work of the anticorruption agency, the consolida-



tion of the audit office to check the expenditure and maladministration of government agencies, the emphasis on media scrutiny of the government in a politically loyal manner, the improvement in the oversight of the legislature on the government, and the gradual consolidation of village elections to enhance cadre and party accountability at the grassroots level. These Chinese-style characteristics will persist and it is unlikely that the Western-style democracy would suddenly emerge, even though crises, such as economic and social crises, may suddenly propel China forward along the path of a more democratic regime.

**JPG: Are there any paradoxes of democracy in Hong Kong that you would like to address?**

**SL:** Hong Kong's democratic experiments are unique in the world. On the one hand, it has a strong middle class where Western-educated and locally educated citizens are increasingly embracing the Western-style democracy and values. But on the other hand, the strong capitalist class whose interests have been so protected by both the colonial regime and the post-1997 government as well as Beijing is staunchly anti-democratic in the Western sense. Given the fact that Beijing has to rely on the influence and rule of the capitalists in order to maintain the capitalist lifestyle of Hong Kong and its related economic prosperity, the Hong Kong city-state remains capitalistic and highly exploitative in terms of the protection of the interests of the poor and the needy, especially the proletariat and the lumpen proletariat. The tax system, housing policies and land policies are highly biased in favour of the strong capitalist class, which however is politically inactive and spoiled to a large extent. Yet, the politically active citizenry and groups involve the pro-democratic and pro-Beijing groups. The result is that Hong Kong is a deeply political divided society where the capitalist class is politically anachronistic and anti-democratic, where the liberal segment of the middle class is highly pro-democratic and pro-Western, where the pro-Beijing local forces are tasked by Beijing to check the power and influence of the liberal segment of

the middle class, and where the government is a politically conservative one allying with the capitalist class, Beijing and the pro-Beijing forces. Yet, as class contradictions are intensifying in Hong Kong where the productive forces are growing quickly due to the development of capitalism, sooner or later such contradictions will not only split the pro-government and pro-Beijing camp and forces, but also perhaps propel democratic changes in Hong Kong further. Class politics and contradictions are arguably most prominent in this vibrant Chinese city, which is like a political sandwich between a very Chinese central government in Beijing and an increasingly pro-Western and politically assertive citizenry in Hong Kong.

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**Notes:**

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