

Contemporary Hong Kong Government and Politics

Third Edition

Edited by

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Conclusion

Looking to the Future

Lam Wai-man, Percy Luen-tim Lui, and Wilson Wong

As of 2023, Hong Kong has entered the third decade as a special administrative region under the sovereignty of China. Like its previous editions, this volume attempts to provide an updated, comprehensive, and critical analysis of the development of Hong Kong's governing institutions, major policy areas, and relationship with China and the world in the context of governance and the experiment of "one country, two systems" (OCTS). Along with this attempt, topics related to political parties and the electoral systems, the mass media and public opinion, political culture and identity, and civil society in Hong Kong are also examined with regard to how successful they have been in promoting a more effective, accountable, and legitimate governance.

Political Institutions

This part of the volume covers major political institutions of the HKSAR, which include the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, the civil service, and the local administrative bodies. All these political institutions have, to a different degree, been affected by the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019, the enactment of the NSL in 2020, and the implementation of the electoral system reform in 2021.

In Chapter 2, Li Pang-kwong examines the composition of the HKSAR executive, the powers that it enjoys, how it functions, its relationship with the legislature, and factors that affect its performance. Li also studies the notion of executive-led government and concludes that the executive-led government has been replaced by the executive-driven government (which means that, though the executive does not possess the power to constitute the legislature, the pro-government political figures are in the majority of the legislature). Under the executive-driven government, the HKSAR government has to build its majority

coalition in the LegCo by persuasion and performance, not by institutional default. Li also examines the political dynamics developed since the Anti-ELAB Movement. He asserts that the new electoral arrangements put in place since 2021 have made room for the CE and the executive to judge and confirm the eligibility of LegCo candidates, through which it is easy to exclude anti-government candidates for the LegCo elections. Subsequently, one sees the return of an overwhelming majority of pro-government legislators in the LegCo. Moreover, one also sees the suppression of the influence of the opposition camp to the bare minimal level. As a result, though not equipped with the power to constitute the legislature, the CE, with the support from the Central People's Government (CPG), can dictate the decision of the legislature as he/she sees fit. Under such institutional arrangements, a variant form of the executive-led government is being brought back in. Though, with the growing support of the CPG, the CE could be released from the pressure of losing the majority in the ExCo and the LegCo, but the question of how to return a credible and capable CE with an effective governing team remains the pressing issue to be addressed.

In Chapter 3, by comparing the performance of the sixth term HKSAR LegCo with the 1995–1997 LegCo, Percy Lui finds that the greater the number of pro-democracy legislators the LegCo has, the greater its assertiveness to discharge its duties, and vice versa. Lui also examines other factors (such as the constitutional constraints imposed by the Basic Law) that would affect the capacity and performance of the HKSAR LegCo. After discussing why the sixth-term HKSAR LegCo had performed unsatisfactorily, Lui moves on to examine plausible impacts of major political developments, including (1) disqualifying legislators: rounds 1 and 2 (November 2016 and July 2017, and November 2020); (2) the Anti-ELAB Movement (June 2019–early 2020), the enactment of the NSL (July 2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic (December 2019–mid 2023); and (3) reforming the LegCo electoral methods (March 2021) on the performance of the future terms of the HKSAR LegCo. Under the new electoral methods, the seventh-term HKSAR LegCo is composed by an overwhelming majority of pro-government legislators. Though whether the future LegCo would act like the earlier Provisional Legislative Council (which acted more like an arm of the administration than as a watchdog of the government) remains to be seen, it is fair to predict that it would not be as assertive and aggressive as the previous terms HKSAR LegCo in checking the behavior and performance of the Hong Kong government.

In Chapter 4, Lai Yan-ho studies the HKSAR Judiciary. Lai observes that though Hong Kong enjoys a separate judicial system from the Mainland, when the central authorities become more aggressive in exercising direct or indirect control over Hong Kong, the latter lacks ability to resist exercise of power by the sovereign. Consequently, whether the courts can still uphold impartiality and

act as guardians of human rights when adjudicating judicial reviews or criminal trials related to anti-government protests became questionable. By examining the trials of the activists in the Umbrella Movement (UM), Lai asserts that public order laws and the courts have been weaponized by the government to silence the political opposition. These practices became more prominent in the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019. As there are many pending trials related to the movement, it is important to see how the verdicts and sentences of these Anti-ELAB cases will affect the criminal justice system, judicial independence, and the rule of law in Hong Kong. Moreover, given the introduction of the NSL in Hong Kong by the CPG, the whole judicial system as well as the enjoyment of judicial autonomy in Hong Kong is now undergoing a drastic change. Above all, Lai notes that various surveys conducted after the enactment of the NSL show that citizens have become much less confident in the rule of law and judicial independence in Hong Kong. As Lai argues, it would be a challenging task for the judiciary and the governments of both HKSAR and PRC to rebuild public trust in the judiciary.

In Chapter 5, Wilson Wong studies the features of and roles that the Hong Kong civil service played in the governance of Hong Kong before and after the 1997 handover, including the post-2020 era. When Hong Kong was a British colony, the political system was a bureaucrat-dominated system with only bureaucrats but no professional politicians. Major public policies were formulated by senior civil servants (belonging to the administrative officer grade) and implemented by the civil service. As Wong points out, the civil service is taken as the “institutional conscience” of Hong Kong, and the civil service system is designed to ensure that civil servants can make the best policies based on their own expertise and judgment, without being threatened or biased by both internal and external pressures. Wong also analyzes the details of reforms to the civil service system after the handover. These reforms include the ASPO, politicization of the civil service (especially under the Leung and Lam administrations), public sector reform and civil service reform. Despite all these reforms and the changing role, Wong notes that the Hong Kong civil service remains an influential actor in the governance of the HKSAR. With reference to the need to make use of emerging technologies to continuously improve public services, Wong asserts that the civil service should invest much more aggressively in areas like collaborative governance and digital governance to strengthen its capacities to cope with the new circumstances and challenges in the post Anti-ELAB Movement era.

In Chapter 6, Rami Chan studies the HKSAR’s local government system and its complex web of advisory and statutory bodies. Chan first details the development, functions, and the empowerment of the DCs in 2001 and 2006. He examines in detail the political role of the DCs (elections of the DCs have been

political battlegrounds for various political parties to gain influence in district administration and in Hong Kong politics). He argues that the passage of the government's constitutional reform package in June 2010 has transformed a DC from a simple advisory body into a dynamic arena for power struggle. Though the Anti-ELAB Movement helped the pan-democrats achieve a landslide victory in the 2019 DC elections (which gave birth to the first ever pan-democrat-dominated DCs: 17 out of 18), the subsequent political developments such as the enactment of the NSL and the electoral reform in March 2021 have removed almost all the political influence of the DCs in the name of reinforcing DCs to align their status as not an "organ of political power," according to the Basic Law. The narrowing political environment after the enactment of the NSL would also significantly affect the role and function of advisory and statutory bodies. When political loyalty becomes a priority on the selection and appointment of membership, it will further affect the creditability of these consultative bodies.

Mediating Institutions and Political Actors

With the limitations of institutional politics in Hong Kong discussed above, mediating institutions have played some important functions to compensate for the participation gap. In the last edition of this volume, we cast doubt as to how political stability and effective governance could be maintained without substantial and genuine reforms to the political system, given the inevitable changes in the political landscape and constraints on the political development of Hong Kong. The past decade witnessed blatant politicization and divisions in society and open conflicts between the authorities and the people, as well as among the people until 2021.

Chapter 7 analyzes the democratic reforms in Hong Kong by Lai Yan-ho and Sing Ming. The chapter provides an overview of the path of democratization in Hong Kong since the colonial era. The blockade of a fair and open process for nominating candidates in future CE elections in 2014 contributed to the outbreak of the UM. Demands for universal suffrage continued and were heightened during the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019. Nevertheless, the NSL introduced in 2020—and the subsequent arrests, disqualifications of democratic lawmakers, and so forth—brought about gigantic changes to the political landscape in Hong Kong. Popular confidence in democracy, the rule of law, and freedom in Hong Kong also witnessed sharp falls until recently. The question is whether the support for freedom and democracy in Hong Kong in the last few decades would go further. The future democratic development in post-2020 Hong Kong will hinge upon the interplay among the CPG, domestic pro-establishment and pro-democracy forces, and the global environment.

In Chapter 8, on political parties and elections, Kwong Ying-ho and Mathew Y. H. Wong provide a historical review of party politics and elections in Hong Kong and highlight the dynamics among the Chinese government, the Hong Kong government, and pro-Beijing, pro-democracy, and localist parties in Hong Kong. Hong Kong had a multiparty system with polarized ideological spectrums. In the past decade, the traditional classification of pro-democracy and pro-Beijing political parties was challenged through the rise of localist organizations, leading to a new spectrum between “pro-establishment” and “non-establishment.” Regarding elections, the chapter provides a review of the results of various LegCo elections and seat allocations among the political parties. Owing to the executive-dominant system of Hong Kong—in which the power of the executive branch is guaranteed, whereas the legislature is fragmented and given relatively limited power—popular support for political parties has been low. Additionally, Hong Kong people are generally skeptical of party politics because of various factors, notably including the Chinese government’s strategies in Hong Kong. As such, party politics has remained weak and the development of political parties stagnant regardless of their political orientations. In the legislative elections in 2021, the pro-establishment camp gained a sweeping victory and consolidated its political influence. The development of political parties and elections in Hong Kong will depend on whether the authorities take further steps to transform the political party system in Hong Kong, as well as the development of the pro-establishment camp amid the changes.

Chapter 9, by Stephan Ortmann on civil society, traces the emergence of civil society in colonial times and its development into a liberal civil society in the 1990s. The chapter then takes stock of the situation after the handover regarding the development of the vast united front network of political parties, trade unions, business elites, newly created counterprotest organizations, hometown associations, neighborhood organizations, and so forth, which attempted to provide an alternative to the liberal civil society and curb its expansion. Social conflicts culminated in the UM and were then heightened by the Anti-ELAB Movement, which saw unprecedented mobilizations in Hong Kong. However, the NSL, promulgated in 2020, would weaken the civil society, allowing only depoliticized nongovernmental organizations endorsed by the state. Also, businesses that side with pro-democracy activists have also encountered more political pressure. Ortmann argues that Hong Kong has changed to an illiberal authoritarian regime, which would seriously impact the growth of the civil society.

Chapter 10, by Lam Wai-man on political identity, culture, and participation, reviews the conflicting readings by scholars before and after the handover of Hong Kong’s political culture as politically passive and analyzes the developments of the subject matter after 2012. In the 2010s, the Hong Kong identity had

shed much of its Chineseness and instead developed into a new Hong Konger identity, with consolidated cultural and value contents capable of generating and sustaining political actions. The development of localism—namely, community-oriented localism, civic localism, and nativist localism—signified another landmark turn in the Hong Kong identity. Another climax happened in the Anti-ELAB Movement, during which localism in Hong Kong took an ideological and strategic turn into Hong Kong nationalism or “civic nationalism,” which further led to a brand of Hong Konger identity geared toward greater political autonomy for Hong Kong. These existed alongside the activist character of the local political culture, marked by people’s growing fundamental social and political demands and increased endorsement of radicalized and confrontational strategies. Despite these, civility and the rule of law had long been ascribed as indispensable elements of the colonial order, and the political culture in Hong Kong still embodied elements of political passivity, such as low interest in politics and low sense of political efficacy. Meanwhile, political trust had dwindled over the years and especially after the Anti-ELAB Movement, until recently. The changing political culture had enhanced institutional and noninstitutional participation, collective actions, and social movements in Hong Kong, such as the formation of community, professional, and political organizations by locals driven by social and political consciousness. After the promulgation of the NSL, the above organizational activism has been restrained, and it is likely that institutional participation would become the more popular form of expression.

Chapter 11, by Joseph M. Chan and Francis L. F. Lee on mass media and public opinion, discusses the definitions of public opinion, the roles of the mass media, and their effects in the process of public opinion formation. Structural factors shape the operation of media organizations and constrain journalists’ capabilities in adhering to their professional ideals. In Hong Kong, since most local media organizations are business enterprises, they are subject to ownership influence, advertisers, and market-driven journalism. Since the early 2010s, the trends of ownership of Hong Kong media by Mainland Chinese capital and the co-optation of media owners have allowed more Chinese control or influence over the Hong Kong press. Particularly, the passage of the NSL has imposed immense pressure on Hong Kong media to self-censor and further eroded the resilience of journalistic professionalism. Alongside the importance of the media is public opinion, which has become a key factor of governance in Hong Kong. Regarding this, government officials are in general identified as the “primary definers,” whereas journalists are the “secondary definers.” Meanwhile, citizens and various social forces may shape the representation of public opinion in the media, especially through collective actions. However, Chan and Lee assert that the NSL would also result in a chilling effect marked by self-censorship in all social sectors.

Policy Environment

The chapters on policy environment focus on “governance in action.” It serves the purpose of illustrating how political forces and policy actors compete to determine “who gets what, when and how” in each policy area, as structured by the political institutions in Hong Kong. Although the three chapters are written independently by different authors, similar conclusions are made. They conclude that public policy should be approached as conscious and rational choices by policymakers with consideration of the public interest, a long-term perspective, and fairness to all citizens. On the other hand, they are also shaped by the macro-political systems and the overall power dynamics in Hong Kong, which explain the similar patterns and observations identified across chapters. Many policies in Hong Kong are dominated by those who enjoy more power in the governing institutions at the expense of the less represented and organized groups, which led to questions and reflections on the necessity and desirability of reforms on both the policy level and the level of macro-political institutions.

In Chapter 12, by Wilson Wong and Raymond Yuen on economic policy, a central theme is that economic policy is shaped by more than economic forces. The image of a “market economy” is more a myth than a reality, as political considerations often override economic logic in shaping economic policy. One of the examples is Hong Kong’s fiscal system, under which the politically powerful are often taxed less but benefit more. Owing to the new and major developments in Hong Kong’s politics and governance, there have been corresponding changes to expedite the shift from an approach of a relatively invisible hand in economic policy toward an increasingly visible hand marked with budgetary punctuations. The old doctrines of economic policy, such as positive nonintervention and fiscal prudence with a balanced budget, are given less adherence, as Hong Kong’s economic policy is becoming more similar to the Mainland, which prefers a more interfering government and a planned economy. These changes are translated into a more aggressive model of industrial policy and budgetary punctuations, including higher public expenditure and a budget deficit. There are doubts about how a balance can be struck between a more visible role of government and sustainable fiscal health, especially during a period of economic decline in both Hong Kong and the Mainland. Given the inseparable linkage between economic policy and governance, another challenge for the HKSAR government is how to coordinate economic transformation with structural reforms in its governance system.

Chapter 13, by Wong Hung on social policy, describes the social policy in the post-1997 era as no more than “old wine in new bottles.” Social policy of the HKSAR government still has the same economic pragmatism origin as its colonial past. In practice, Hong Kong has never claimed or committed to be a welfare

state and has limited welfare provision. The practical and piecemeal responses produced are inadequate for addressing the fundamental needs and problems, leading to sharp deteriorations of the social conditions in Hong Kong, which include deepening of poverty and a widening wealth gap. According to the principle of “one country, two systems,” the Hong Kong government should have the will to govern. A more comprehensive, long-term, and people-oriented planning for social policy should be adopted, with greater participation of the civil society to make Hong Kong people enjoy life with better health care, housing, and social security. However, the HKSAR government seems to lose its will to govern and tends to wait for the CPG to take political leadership in handling the social problems and rising class conflicts. In this connection, the latest strategy of the Hong Kong government to further integrate Hong Kong into the development of the Greater Bay Area and Mainland China can only offer a vague framework. It remains unable to provide solid grounding for formulating a people-oriented social policy.

Chapter 14, by Ng Mee Kam on urban policy, points out the need for Hong Kong, as a world city, to adopt the New Urban Agenda of the United Nations to call for a paradigm shift in urban planning, development, and management to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hong Kong has been facing challenging urban issues related to its legacies as a British colony and a specific brand of “state-led liberal capitalism” that focuses on economic growth. There is a need for concerted tripartite efforts by the now multilevel governments, the private sector, and the civil society to integrate ecological and social justice considerations during economic and spatial development. Shifting away from an urban biased mode of development bequeathed by the colonizers and the government’s reliance on land and property-related revenues, the pathway toward the future should “leave no one, no place, and no ecology behind.” Instead of developing the Lantau Tomorrow Vision, an alternative New Territories Tomorrow Vision is preferred to strategically reimagine and replan the rural New Territories, where most of the land resources lie. This would require a reorientation of the government from reclaiming land from the sea to restoring and “reclaiming” land, practicing integrated planning that respects nature and promotes conservation of tangible and intangible heritages. While the government should have enough resources to undertake this challenge, the question is if they would have such a vision and mission.

Political Environment

As a global city and part of China, Hong Kong’s politics are undoubtedly shaped by the external environment beyond domestic forces. We have devoted the last

two chapters of this book to the political environment of Hong Kong, including its relations with the Mainland and the wider world.

Chapter 15, by Peter T. Y. Cheung on the changing relations between Hong Kong and the Mainland, analyzes the changing strategy of Beijing in governing Hong Kong since President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012. Against the background of the consolidation of the hard authoritarian mode of governance and the establishment of a security state in Mainland China, the once indispensable role of Hong Kong in China's economic development has changed. These along with the profound repercussions of the OCM and UM have transformed the relations between Hong Kong and the Mainland ever since. Overall, Beijing's "comprehensive jurisdiction" over Hong Kong can be conceptualized into several components, including asserting constitutional and legislative authority, the securitization of Hong Kong's governance, overhauling the electoral system, emphasizing ideological authority and strengthening united front work, responding actively to external influence over Hong Kong affairs, incorporating Hong Kong into the national development framework, and revamping the governing team and central organs in Hong Kong and Macao affairs. While Hong Kong may maintain its own systems as different from the Mainland, with "patriots administering Hong Kong," the revamping of other state and social institutions, and the reeducation of values and ideologies in Hong Kong, the emerging political order in Hong Kong will inevitably undergo a homogenization process.

Chapter 16, by Li Hak-yin and Ting Wai on Hong Kong's international status, reexamines Hong Kong's international status. The chapter summarizes the key literature around Hong Kong's international status, offers a backgrounder on Hong Kong's major political developments since the UM, analyzes Hong Kong's changing international status from multiple perspectives, and evaluates Hong Kong's future international status by reviewing possible challenges and their implications. The UM and the Anti-ELAB Movement served as the source of conflict between China and the West over Hong Kong. While China saw numerous demonstrations in Hong Kong and Western pressures as tremendous foreign interventions in Hong Kong, the West and foreign business corporations have also been upset because of the increasing Chinese interventions toward Hong Kong and the NSL. The rapid change in Hong Kong's international status carries several implications for the world: Hong Kong is no longer a "window" between China and the West; the trend of Hong Kong's Mainlandization is increasing; Hong Kong is no longer a model for Taiwan; and Hong Kong is caught in the deglobalization or decoupling process between China and the US. The increasing direct control of Hong Kong by Beijing challenges the robustness of Hong Kong's institutions. In the future, the international character of Hong Kong will decline while its Chinese character increases, although these two characters are not necessarily mutually exclusive to each other.

Discussion

Based on the critical analysis of the chapters in this volume, we would like to highlight several major changes to the governance and politics in Hong Kong in recent years.

Evolution of the “one country, two systems” principle

The “one country, two systems” (OCTS) principle has steadily evolved in the past two decades. Simply put, the evolution of the principle is reflected in a shift of emphasis from “two systems” to “one country,” and a corresponding development in the understanding of the notion of a “high degree of autonomy.” One can examine the evolution of the OCTS principle from four different periods: (1) from 1997 to 2003, (2) from 2003 to 2014, (3) from 2014 to 2019, and (4) from 2019 onward.

In the first period, the emphasis is on the differences between the two systems, which granted the HKSAR a high degree of autonomy to manage its own affairs, except national defense and foreign affairs. During this period, the CPG was conscious not to give the impression that it was exercising undue intervention in the HKSAR’s governance. To paraphrase a comment from the former President of China, Jiang Zemin, “the river water would not mix with the well water.” Such a comment vividly characterized the spirit of the OCTS principle until July 2003.

July 2003 marks the beginning of the second period of the implementation of the OCTS principle. On 1 July 2003, more than 500,000 people took to the streets to protest the perceived poor performance of the HKSAR government, especially its proposals to enact a national security law to give effect to Article 23 of the Basic Law. Both the HKSAR government and the CPG were shocked by the “1 July march,” as it was the first time in the history of Hong Kong that so many people had publicly demonstrated against the government. Alarmed by the growing discontent of the Hong Kong people toward the government’s performance, the CPG began to take a more proactive approach in the governance of the HKSAR. A case in point is its greater involvement in negotiating a political reform package with the Democratic Party in May 2010. Though the CPG has taken a more proactive approach in its dealing with the HKSAR, there was no evidence that it has significantly restricted the degree of autonomy that the HKSAR government enjoyed during this period.

In June 2014, when Hong Kong society was debating the next move in reforming its political system (including the planning of the Occupy Central Movement by the pan-democratic camp), the State Council of China issued the *White Paper on The Practice of the “One Country, Two Systems” Policy in the Hong*

Kong Special Administrative Region. The main theme of the White Paper is the CPG’s reassertion of its “comprehensive jurisdiction” over the HKSAR. Later, on 31 August 2014, the SCNPC announced its Decision (31 August Decision), which set the parameters for the further development in the HKSAR’s political reform. In the eyes of the CPG, the emphasis of the OCTS principle then was clearly on “one country,” and subsequently, a narrower interpretation of the notion of a “high degree of autonomy” that the HKSAR enjoys in governing itself. Moreover, the Occupy Central Movement (which took place on 28 September 2014) and the subsequent development in the HKSAR politics (like the 2016 LegCo elections) gave a big boost to localism, which emphasized “two systems” more than “one country.”

Lastly, in response to the Anti-ELAB Movement, the CPG enacted the NSL for the HKSAR on 30 June 2020. Furthermore, to ensure that patriots would govern the HKSAR, the SCNPC issued a decision on 11 March 2021 to improve the electoral systems of Hong Kong (including the electoral systems of the EC and the LegCo). Today, as some critics assert, the emphasis on the OCTS principle is primarily on “one country,” not on “two systems.” Such an emphasis naturally would result in a much more restrictive understanding of the notion of a “high degree of autonomy” that the HKSAR government would possess in governing Hong Kong. The developments in Hong Kong politics are closely tied with the further integration of Hong Kong with the Mainland.

Securitizing Hong Kong

The securitization of Hong Kong has remained a top agenda for the government. The Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019 eventually led to thousands of arrests and prosecutions. In June 2020, the National Anthem Ordinance, which criminalizes insults to the national anthem of China, came into effect. Additionally, the NSL—which criminalizes separatism, subversion, terrorism, and foreign interference—was promulgated on 30 June 2020. With the implementation of the NSL, an Office for Safeguarding National Security of the CPG and a Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the HKSAR were set up in the territory. The wide-ranging provisions of the NSL are perceived by some as having unfathomable, chilling effects in society.

Since 2020, all civil servants have been required to swear allegiance and sign a pledge declaring that they would uphold the Basic Law, bear allegiance to the HKSAR, and be accountable to the HKSAR government. With the passing of the oath-taking requirement bill in the LegCo in March 2021, the mandatory oath of allegiance has been extended to cover DC members and all personnel hired on non-civil service terms. This has led to massive resignations of District Councilors. Along with this was the launch of a further electoral system reform

for Hong Kong on 11 March 2021, which drastically altered the election methods of the Election Committee (EC) subsector elections and the LegCo elections in 2021, the CE election in 2022, and the status of the DCs.

Since the promulgation of the NSL, there have been a series of arrests and prosecutions, with many trials pending and suspects long detained in custody; of democrats and localists for joining or organizing the 4 June commemoration and the 1 October protest in 2020 not approved by the police; participation in the pan-democrats organized primaries for the 2020 LegCo elections (postponed to December 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic); and the publication of seditious materials. Furthermore, the police raided the offices of *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*. *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* closed after the police raids and arrests, and *Hong Kong Citizen News* also disbanded in January 2022.

Reconstituting the identity of younger generations has been one of the foremost tasks of the government. For example, the former CE, Carrie Lam, stressed that students should be trained to become law-abiding, respect different opinions, and adopt a responsible attitude as members of society. She had reiterated the importance of cultivating students' understanding of the country's development, the Basic Law, the implementation of "one country, two systems," and the importance of national security. She further urged teaching young people to respect and preserve the dignity of the national flag and the national anthem, as well as to develop in them a sense of identity, belonging, and responsibility toward the country, the Chinese race, and society. Since the subject of Liberal Studies was blamed by pro-establishment figures for encouraging students to participate in protests, it was replaced by "Citizenship and Social Development" in the 2021–2022 school year onward. The term of CE John Lee started in 2022. In a similar vein, his government has also sought to boost Hong Kong's economic and social development through active promotion of the city's integration into the national development alongside ensuring its social stability, patriotism, and national security.

Refocusing on economic development and greater integration with the Mainland

The focus of the HKSAR government after the enactment of the NSL and the reform to the electoral systems has been on economic development, which is understandable since the Hong Kong economy, like other economies in the world, was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. A major strategy that the government relies on is to further integrate the Hong Kong economy with the Mainland. The rationale behind the further economic integration between the two sides is simple—the further development of the Hong Kong economy would

enhance the well-being of the Hong Kong people, which, in turn, would restore and enhance the legitimacy of both the CPG and the HKSAR government.

Indeed, such an integration began as early as 2002, when Hong Kong negotiated a closer economic partnership with China. The two sides signed the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on 29 June 2003. The signing of CEPA and the opening up of “individual visits” by Mainland residents to the HKSAR in August 2003 signaled the beginning of Hong Kong’s greater economic integration with the Mainland. Later, there was an initiative to bring together nine provinces of southern China (Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, Guangxi, Hainan, Sichuan, Guizhou, Jiangxi, and Yunnan) along with Hong Kong and Macao to form a common market, which has been described as the “Pan-Pearl River Delta” (PRD, or simply 9+2).

Like the development in the political front, there is a steady increase in the economic integration between the HKSAR and the Mainland. This is especially so after the Occupy Central Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement. The CPG and the HKSAR government believe that the future development of the Hong Kong economy lies in the Mainland in general (Hong Kong has been covered in China’s National Five-Year Plans, including the 12th, 13th, and 14th, since its return to China) and the Greater Bay Area (GBA) initiative (which was launched in 2017) in particular. The GBA comprises the two special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macao, and the nine municipalities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, and Zhaoqing in Guangdong Province. The HKSAR government asserts that the GBA would generate new impetus for the growth of the Hong Kong economy and bring new development opportunities to different sectors of the HKSAR. As such, one can expect the CPG and the HKSAR government to adopt more measures in the future to facilitate further integration of the Hong Kong economy with the Mainland. Overall, it is fair to say that the shifting of emphasis from “two systems” to “one country” as well as the greater integration of the Hong Kong economy with the Mainland would have far-reaching impact on governing style and the degree of autonomy that the HKSAR government possesses in governing the HKSAR.

Readjustment of civil society

With the promulgation of the NSL and the 2021 electoral system reform, pro-autonomy and pro-independence political parties were disbanded, while traditional pro-democracy political parties were marginalized. The pro-establishment camp, on the contrary, has grown in number, influence, and political power. As seen with the 2021 Legislative Council elections, of the 90 legislators returned, there was only one non-establishment figure.

The civil society in Hong Kong became very polarized between the pro- and anti-establishment political identities and political participation after the Occupy Movement in 2014. This rift was heightened during and after the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019. Nevertheless, the many “red lines” that emerged with the NSL have utterly paralyzed if not wiped out the anti-establishment camps. As of 2023, prominent civil society organizations had either ceased operation or disbanded, including the Civil Human Rights Front, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, and the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China. Other relatively moderate social and professional organizations and unions have also gone silent or dissolved. Various universities cut ties with their student organizations, which had been the backbone of pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong in the past decade. Campus statues and symbols associated with local resistance were removed, including the Pillar of Shame at the University of Hong Kong and the Goddess of Democracy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

With the authorities’ directive that “patriots rule Hong Kong,” civil society organizations have to be depoliticized and politically correct in order to survive. The growing stringent patriotic atmosphere has prompted many people to leave Hong Kong. It was reported that the net outflow of people from June 2020 to mid-2021 in the “Hong Kong exodus” was 89,200 (Bao 2021). Remaining oppositionists, largely frustrated or alienated, would choose “lying flat” (*tǎng píng*), which literally means being knocked out of a fight or out of action. Others looking for alternatives would resort to supporting pro-democracy businesses in the Yellow Economic Circle and becoming involved in informal social and literal activities, and so on. Nevertheless, these businesses and activities may also be seen as a concerted effort against the government. In short, the civil society, which had fueled not only the political but also social and economic developments in Hong Kong over the past decades, has been shocked and hammered. In 2023 and the years onward, the challenge for the civil society will be in finding its path to recovery and repositioning itself.

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