

China does not understand Hong Kong's leaderless movement

Arrest of Joshua Wong and others will not quell protests

Chit Wai John Mok for Nikkei SEPTEMBER 02, 2019 15:02 JST

Without a clear marching route, protesters coordinated among themselves.

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On August 30, key pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, including Joshua Wong and three lawmakers from the opposition camp, were arrested. After months of protests both peaceful and violent against a proposed extradition bill and police brutality, the Hong Kong government, instead of making concrete concessions, has decided to step up repression. Protesters responded with more determined action.

What is unusual about this situation is that the anti-extradition bill movement is known for its leaderlessness: not a single person or organization can claim to lead or represent it. While it is true that the Civil Human Rights Front, the major umbrella civil society organization, has held rallies, the organization can hardly direct other local protests and militant action. So why would the government clamp down on these activists?

There are two major reasons, I would argue. First, the government and the pro-Beijing forces may still not believe that a leaderless movement is possible. This should not be surprising because Beijing is used to dealing only with concrete organizations. To China's political leaders, behind every action, there must always be a mastermind.

The current movement is facilitated by two major digital channels, LIHKG and Telegram. LIHKG is the Hong Kong version of Reddit, an online forum where one can debate principles and suggest courses of action for others to vote on. Public chat groups in the Telegram app help spread immediate information during clashes. Protesters on the front lines also communicate through secret Telegram groups.

Since the beginning of the movement, Beijing's mouthpieces -- such as the newspapers directed by the Communist Party -- kept on attacking long-term democratic leaders and former student leaders, such as the veteran Martin Lee, Albert Ho, Nathan Law and Wong.

In their eyes, once the ringleaders are captured, the rest of the bandits will disperse. This is a fundamental miscalculation.

Another possible reason is that the government is escalating its policy of scaring people off the streets. In the past months, protesters faced indiscriminate arrests, vicious police violence, thug attacks and verbal threats from Beijing.

Despite all these deterrents, they kept coming out every week. The government may want to send a clearer warning to protesters: there will be no mercy. Stay off the streets.

The plan did not work well last weekend. While the CHRF did call off the rally, thousands of protesters defied the ban and marched on the streets on Saturday.

Without a clear route, protesters coordinated among themselves. Information was dispersed through Telegram, and some people on the front lines took up the role of

guiding the crowd. Protesters also used their own kinds of sign language or simply yelled out to raise alerts on the ground.

The situation escalated very quickly. The police fired the first shot in the afternoon. Moderates retreated, while militants responded by throwing bricks and Molotov cocktails and setting fires. Violent clashes extended into the evening.

At night, Hong Kongers were outraged when the riot police stormed a subway station with batons and indiscriminately beat up protesters and passengers in a train car. On Sunday, protesters tried to block the airport.

Hong Kongers were outraged when the riot police stormed a subway station with batons. © Getty Images

Scholars who study protest movements have shown that movement participants and their opponents are always learning from each other. Like playing chess, both sides learn by trial and error to find appropriate moves.

In the early stage, when one side escalates, the other side usually follows suit. Since the government is far better-armed, protesters have to be more creative to keep the resistance alive.

So far academia is skeptical about leaderless movements. One significant example is the Occupy Wall Street movement: the occupation did help change the way people talked about inequality, but it also ended with no concrete gains. While leaderlessness is a form of grassroots democracy, some form of organization is always necessary for decision-making. The current movement may be a lesson for others.

In the authoritarian government's playbook, there are many different tactics. Outright violence is usually the costliest choice: it will help "restore calm," but it will not bring legitimacy. Instead, making concession to please moderates is usually a smarter idea.

Carrie Lam's government, however, is fast moving toward the violent and repressive end.

October 1 this year is the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. President Xi Jinping would not be happy if this highly significant day is marred by anti-Beijing protests, or even violence, in Hong Kong.

Lam does not have much time left, but her tactics are not working. Instead of calming the situation, she is sowing more seeds of anger and hatred; instead of listening to the people humbly and appeasing at least the moderates, she is turning her government into a full-fledged authoritarian police state.

Surely there will be more arrests. But Hong Kongers will either stay defiant, or retreat tactically and come out again when opportunities are available. So what can truly bring peace to the city? Beijing knows the answer, and Carrie Lam also knows the answer: nothing other than genuine democratisation.