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Hong Kong Election Reform: Will It Happen?

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Synopsis

The Hong Kong government's election reform proposal would, in theory, allow for greater flexibility and competition for the 2017 race for Chief Executive. However, with pan-democratic lawmakers vowing to veto the proposal, what are the chances of the 'one person one vote' elections happening?

Commentary

ON 22 APRIL 2015, the Hong Kong government put before the Legislative Council its proposal for selecting the Chief Executive by universal suffrage. The government appealed to the legislature, particularly to the pan-democrats, to vote for the new election initiative which would allow over five million Hong Kongers to vote for their leader, under universal suffrage for the first time in 2017.

The electoral reform package requires a two-thirds majority approval - 47 out of 70 members - from the legislature to pass. However, pro-democracy legislators, who control 27 seats, have vowed to veto the package, threatening the proposal and ultimately the 2017 'one person one vote' election. That said, the government only needs to persuade four pro-democrat lawmakers to switch sides to successfully pass the election package.

What do the changes entail?

Nominating procedures will be divided into two parts, namely the stage of "members recommendation" and the stage of "committee nomination". Under the first 'members recommendation' stage, any person who gets at least 120 nominating committee's votes (out of the 1200 nominating committee) can seek to run in the Chief Executive race. No candidate will be allowed to get more than 240 votes from the Nominating Committee thus ensuring at least 5 and at most 10 people who can seek nomination.

Next, under the "committee nomination", out of the initial pool of 5-10 candidates, the 1200 strong Nominating Committee will, through a secret ballot, select the final 2-3 candidates. The balloting process is such that each Nominating Committee member may vote for all of the candidates or/but at least two. The highest two or three persons supported by more than half of the members and with the highest votes will become official candidates for election.

Implications: obstacles for nomination

There are, however, at least three main obstacles in the nomination proposal. First, there is and will be a further erosion of trust between the government and the pro-democracy camp. This will, in essence, cut off any form of serious dialogue or negotiations moving forward. Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, has already stated that the government would not cave in to any demands, stating that there is no room for compromise.

On the one hand, the administration feels that the pro-democrats are not giving enough thought and understanding for the proposed change; and it is exasperated by the, perceived, militant and unconstructive tactics employed. On the other hand, the pro-democrats feel that the changes proposed are piecemeal 'fake' alterations. Joshua Wong, the student leader who became synonymous with the 'Umbrella Revolution', has already dismissed the reform package and vowed to conduct street protests the weekend after the proposed election reform package is announced. The unyielding positions of both camps will, ultimately, have a negative effect for governance in Hong Kong.

Second, while Beijing had largely adopted a 'hands off' approach during the 'Umbrella Revolution, it will lend greater visible support to pro-Beijing elements in Hong Kong. China's Vice President Li Yuan Chao has stated that he hopes people in the "patriotic camp" can urge citizens to support the government's electoral reform package. Indeed, the pro-Beijing camp is not ready to let the pro-democracy camp seize the discourse on 'democracy' entirely. Lessons would have been learnt from the previous 'Occupy Central' protests and the pro-Beijing camp will be better organised, disciplined and sophisticated in their contestation with the pro-democracy activists.

Finally, the prospects of more violence cannot be ruled out in the lead-up to the proposed vote on the election reform proposal in the Legislative Council before it goes into recess on 8 July 2015. As positions gets more entrenched, stakes higher, and the rhetoric from both camps gets ratcheted up, the frustration in both camps at achieving nothing - could spill over. Indeed, after the announcement by Carrie Lam, scuffles outside the legislature broke out as pro-democracy protesters faced off with pro-Beijing demonstrators waving the Chinese flags.

Lack of viable alternatives

Vice President Li's rallying call for Hong Kong to grasp the "historic opportunity" and take a positive, rational and pragmatic attitude to promote the city's democratic path maybe exaggerated and a little self-serving but there is, nonetheless, a large degree of sense to his words.

While the concerns of the pro-democrats about the control of the elections by a small pro-Beijing Nominating Committee are valid, their protests have seriously stressed Hong Kong's society and it would be irresponsible of them not to, at the very least, look seriously at the reform package proposed. Moreover, they have not managed to propose any viable set of alternatives that would be, reasonably and realistically, acceptable to the leaders in Beijing.

To successfully disrupt and do away with this election reform proposal and see that as a success would be a pyrrhic victory because it would mean adhering to the current electoral system – a far worse system than the proposed election reforms. It would also be disingenuous to claim wide public support for the pro-democracy activists' actions: Several polls including one by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, showed Hong Kong society, generally, split down the middle while other polls indicate a greater willingness by the Hong Kong people to accept the proposed reforms.

It would be much better and more realistic for the pro-democracy camp to accept and make small incremental changes over a prolonged period of time rather than take an unrealistic 'all or nothing' approach.

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