

HONG KONG'S POLITICS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

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Executive Summary

1. Hong Kong's success in handling the COVID-19 epidemic must be contextualised against a general reduction in mainland visitors to Hong Kong since the 2019 social unrest, thereby reducing Hong Kong's exposure in the first place.
2. Despite the initial fumbling, the Hong Kong government did well to implement the measures mostly in line with the advice given by the medical community. The government's initial swift responses were in turn calibrated by a healthy amount of public scepticism over the issues of wearing face masks, border closure, immigration control and establishment of quarantine facilities.
3. The traumatic 2003 SARS experience prompted both the Hong Kong government and the public to take the threat seriously. Hong Kong had the psychological preparedness, expertise and state capacity to combat the COVID-19 virus, despite the less than harmonious politics. The people's attitude towards social distancing, mask wearing and personal hygiene played an important part in Hong Kong's success.
4. Hong Kongers' lack of confidence in their government led to the scrutiny of the government's advice on masks and spurred grass-roots efforts to complement less than satisfactory government efforts. For instance, Hong Kongers were active in the procurement and distribution of face masks, an activity that was capitalised upon by the pro-government groups and anti-China groups.
5. The epidemic provided the Hong Kong government and people with a "common enemy" that temporarily alleviated their conflict. Despite the general calm, social unrest did not die down completely. There was unhappiness over the government's handling of the epidemic on various issues, but the Hong Kong government's and medical experts' advice was followed once these issues were resolved.
6. The respite allowed the government to regroup, reorganise and return to the job of governance, and to prepare them for the challenges ahead in the post COVID-19

Hong Kong. The social unrest has subsided because of the epidemic but would likely resume soon in full force after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

7. The epidemic has compounded Hong Kong's economic woes from the 2019 protests. Compared to other countries and jurisdictions, the impact was "smaller" because many businesses had already closed down in 2019. The government has rolled out generous measures to help combat the economic effects and alleviated the pressure for many people for the short term.
8. The epidemic also meant that plans for further integration and development for Hong Kong's role in the Pearl River delta will be postponed, and with some collateral damage to Macau. In the long run, the COVID-19 epidemic might bring more enduring repercussions for Hong Kong's economy and politics.