Hong Kong’s protesters celebrated 24 November District Council elections results. The pro-democracy camp heavily defeated pro-establishment parties and will dominate 17 out of 18 District Councils for the next four years.

The former tripled its Council seats from 120 in 2015 to 388. They now have 86% of seats, a huge surge from 28%.

Hong Kong’s District Council plays mainly an advisory role in the government without substantial power.

The traditionally low voter turnout of below 50% since 1999, however, saw a surge to 71% from 2015’s 47%.

Much has been said about how voters saw the elections as a “referendum” on the protests and the government’s response.

However, in the much more important Legislative Council (LegCo) elections, vote shares between the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps have always been around 60% versus 40%.

In the most recent 2016 LegCo elections, the vote shares were 55% versus 40%, very close to those in the 2019 District Council elections: 57% versus 41%.

MIXED IMPLICATIONS

The implications from this comparison are mixed. First, though the pro-democracy camp won a clear victory, they failed to expand popular support beyond their historic 60% share.

Second, the pro-establishment camp lost the elections but still maintained their long-held 40% of popular support.

In essence, the popular support for both camps basically remains unchanged.

Third, the pro-democracy camp certainly has good reasons to celebrate, but not all is lost for their opponents. Nevertheless, it is clear that protests and violence have not raised as much public support for the pro-establishment camp as they expected.
DEEP DIVISIONS, HUGE ANGST

The District Council elections results have also sent strong signals to Beijing and the Mainland.

Beijing has wisely refrained from publicly and directly intervening in the Hong Kong protests in the last six months, to provide breathing space for “one country, two systems”.

However, protesters and the pro-democracy camp are not letting up. They believe the Hong Kong government is Beijing’s puppet, and without Beijing’s consent, Carrie Lam, the chief executive of the Hong Kong government, cannot accept their five demands.

Of those demands – withdrawal of the Extradition Bill, a refrain from labelling protests as riots, an independent inquiry into police brutality, amnesty for all arrested protesters, and universal suffrage to elect both the chief executive and legislators – only the first has been fulfilled.

Protesters’ discontent with Beijing has now been transformed into a wider anger against the Mainland, which has been felt not only by Mainlanders in Hong Kong, but also Chinese in the Mainland.

The strong division and angst felt by both sides were apparent in a recent trip to Taiwan and mainland China that I took where I had opportunities to discuss the protests with people of different backgrounds.

Hong Kongers and Mainlanders are divided over what defines a successful “one country, two systems”. Hong Kongers believe this philosophy should aim to keep Hong Kong’s way of life intact, with minimum influence from the Mainland.

Mainlanders believe that since Hong Kong has been returned to China for over two decades, China’s growing influence in Hong Kong is not only natural, but also necessary, given national interests, particularly considerations of national security.

While the Hong Kongers emphasise the distinction between the “two systems”, the Mainlanders focus on the necessity of “one country”.

RISING CHINA, FRUSTRATED HONG KONG

The Hong Kong issue is a clash between a rising China that is growing more confident and Hong Kong’s frustrated ambitions.

Hong Kongers fiercely complain that Beijing’s political, economic and social influence is transforming Hong Kong into a typical mainland city, like Shenzhen or Shanghai, leading to a loss of its identity.

In contrast, two decades ago, most Hong Kongers believed that the Mainland would gradually become more like Hong Kong under “one country, two systems”.

Hong Kongers are proud of their way of life, a clean and efficient government, and a liberal and diverse society, but feel frustrated deeply by China’s growing influence.

This has been the root cause of their resistance against the government: They are fighting against unwanted pressures from the Mainland.
It is hard for most Mainlanders to understand Hong Kongers’ frustrations. Mainlanders have great pride and rising confidence about China’s place in the world, its growing economic heft and military prowess. They are surprised by Hong Kong’s rejection of China’s influence and angered by the hatred displayed towards Mainlanders. “Why hasn’t our government crushed the rioters?” “Losing Hong Kong means nothing to us!” These angry words shared with me reflect sentiments among many Mainlanders.

Many Mainlanders think a failed Hong Kong is in Beijing’s interest as Hong Kongers will not wake up until they have suffered enough from the chaos. They believe this is the reason for Beijing to allow the escalation of the violence.

They were surprised by the election results, which suggested that chaos has awoken more Hong Kongers to vote for the pro-democracy camp instead.

However, it is in Beijing’s interest to keep “one country, two systems” intact and safeguard Hong Kong’s economic system and success.

A failed Hong Kong cannot be a role model for Beijing to sell a “one-country, two systems” approach to Taiwan.

Similarly, both Taiwan and the United States have been proud of their political systems and believe that China should enact reforms to become “more democratic”.

A rapidly rising China with a different political system, however, has run against the narrative of the triumph of post-Cold War western liberal democracy.

China’s model of development not only challenges today’s status quo but also has frustrated the United States, Taiwan and many Western countries, which explains in part why they chose to check Beijing’s influence and stand with Hong Kong protesters.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RECONCILIATION

In the wake of the elections, however, both the Hong Kong government and protesters have some precious breathing room for possible reconciliation.

The elections results have boosted the confidence of the pro-democracy camp. Their dominance in the District Councils will give them control over one-third of the Chief Executive Election Committee members, and significantly raise their influence in choosing the next government leader.

This renewed confidence may lead to peaceful and institutional resistance, leading Hong Kong to move away from violent street protests.

The Hong Kong government and Beijing may take this opportunity to offer concessions to the protesters.

However, if the Chinese government is determined to keep them desperate and wait for their stamina to peter out, their confidence will be further frustrated, which would fuel a next round of violent resistance.


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