

Why the protest movement in Hong Kong has become radicalised

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The Anti-Extradition Law (AEL) Movement in Hong Kong in 2019 represents a rare episode of radicalisation in the territory.

The initial demand of protestors was to have a complete withdrawal of a proposed law introduced by Hong Kong authorities in early 2019, which would have allowed for criminal suspects to be extradited to mainland China. In its earlier stages, the movement was far from being radical and violent, with rare occurrence of on-street confrontations between the protestors and the police. This is similar to previous social movements in the post-handover Hong Kong, which have been organized in accordance with the principle of *He li fei fei* 和理非非 (和平、理性、非暴力、非粗口) - 'Peace, rationality, non-violence and non-profanity'.

However, in early June the movement started to show signs of radicalisation, with protestors formulating their 'Five Demands'. The demands can be summarised as complete withdrawal of the extradition bill, retracting the characterisation of the movement as riot, setting up a commission of independent inquiry into alleged police brutality and misconduct, amnesty for arrested protestors, and implementation of universal suffrage for both the Legislative Council and Chief Executive. Those demands remain largely unmet, except for the formal withdrawal of the proposed extradition law last September.

On-street violent confrontations between the more radical protestors and the police force became a common scene at protest sites. By the end of 2019, more than 6,000 protestors were arrested. This process of radicalisation has arisen not only due to

concerns within Hong Kong about the increasingly tight control of China but has been fuelled by complex interactions between the international political environment, local protestors and security forces.

The causes of radicalisation cannot simply be explained by discussing the ‘root causes’ such as housing problems, lack of upward social mobility and the undemocratic nature of government. I argue that the interactive dynamics between the transnational political environment, movement actors and security forces account for the onset and reinforcement of the radicalisation of the movement.

The effects of the transnational political environment on the movement’s radicalisation

The AEL Movement arose during rising tensions and distrust between China and western nations, such as the trade war between the former and the United States (since diffused at least partially by the signing of the Phase 1 trade deal between the two nations in January 2020) and security concerns in nations such as Australia over China’s 5G technology.

The anti-China positions being articulated in the international arena presented opportunities to the protestors from the early stages of the movement, since they resonated with local concerns. A recent [survey](#) conducted with more than 700 respondents aged 18 or above by the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong found that only 14% of the respondents reported that they had confidence in the Chinese central government, compared to 20.1% in October 2018. The public quickly associated the extradition amendment bill with a malicious attempt to tighten China’s control over Hong Kong. As such, the bill was widely recognized as *Song zhong tiaoli* 送中條例 - ‘Extradition to China bill’ and the movement was initially called the *Fan song zhong yundong* 反送中運動 - ‘Anti-

Extradition to China Movement'. The movement's appeals to resist intrusion from China echoed with that in many western nations under the anti-China frame.

Although the protestors were expecting this attitude to bring more support to their cause, in reality the ability of the protest movement to enlist the help of potential supporters such as the United States and Britain was undermined by the fact that both were deeply embroiled in their own internal politics in the second half of 2019. The domestic concerns over the impeachment inquiry against the President in the United States and the complicated political situation in Britain in relation to its exit from the European Union made it clear that international actors sympathetic to the cause of Hong Kong protestors would not deliver as much as the latter wanted. Added to that, the rising diplomatic and economic clout of China meant many Western nations were unwilling to invest their diplomatic capital to provide direct and tangible support to Hong Kong protestors. Therefore, the overall international political environment weakened the strategic positioning of the protest movement in Hong Kong.

Still, participants of the movement regard further internationalisation of their cause the best way forward and thus have welcomed the increasing international profile of the movement since the movement became radicalised. The process of violence and counter-violence has reinforced the suppressive image of both the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese authorities. The exchange of violence between the protestors and the authorities have offered an avenue for movement advancement in this regard.

The protests drew much international attention and have been widely reported in international media. The anti-China positions present in many Western nations effected the narratives used by the international community and media, as well as action taken by foreign governments: for example, the decision to expedite the passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act in the US Congress after violent clashes between the radical protestors and police on university campuses.

‘Outbidding’: the interaction between protestors and authorities/security forces and its effect on radicalisation

The interactive dynamics between movement activists and state security forces provide further clues to why the movement has become radicalised.

In the case of the AEL Movement in Hong Kong, “outbidding” developed between the movement activists and the Hong Kong Police Force when street-level conflicts replaced peaceful demonstrations. Social movement scholar Eitan Alimi refers to “outbidding” as concerning the interaction between protestors and security forces which has the aim of raising the stakes for control.

In Hong Kong, outbidding between the movement activists and the police force is underpinned by two factors – attribution of similarity; and legitimatisation – in which the general public identified themselves either as supporters or sympathizers of the radical protestors (attribution of similarity), which legitimised the latter’s actions in challenging the authorities and police force (legitimatisation).

The escalation of protests inevitably involved incriminating actions (e.g. unlawful assembly, rioting, vandalism, etc.). But crucially it helped create either a heroic image of the frontline activists when they confronted the police; or an image as victims when they were mishandled or arrested by the police in the course of state’s counteraction.

‘Attribution of similarity’ and the support of the Hong Kong public

Attribution of similarity operated at the outset of the movement. Unlike the previous social movements in Hong Kong which were usually dominated by competitive

dynamics, the AEL Movement has emphasized the inclusion and coordination of different actors. This can be observed by the frequently quoted movement watchwords of *Xiongdi pashan, gezi nuli* 兄弟爬山，各自努力 - 'We fight on, each in his own way' and *Qi shang qi luo* 齊上齊落 - 'United we stand, divided we fall', both of which were developed in the early stage of radicalization.

This support is most evidenced in the results of local elections in November 2019, in which one of the central messages adopted to mobilise voters to cast their ballots was to recognize the efforts of the radical protestors through voting. There were also media interviews with some of the frontline protestors at the time, in which they asked voters to cast their votes on the election day because '[voting is much easier than being tear-gassed](#)'.

The eventual high turnout rate as well as the landslide victory of the opposition camp reflects that the moderates joined hands with the radical segment of the movement.

Banner image: Demonstrators wearing the masks representing the mascots of the movement (pepe frog and protest pig) with the hand gesture representing 'Five Demands'. Credit: [Jimmy Lam @ USP United Social Press 社媒](#)

Source: Compiled by the author from data of the Electoral Affairs Commission, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Pro-democracy candidates won 385 out of 452 seats, leaving only 59 seats held by pro-Beijing candidates. A survey conducted after the election by a number of local scholars at the march held on the 8th of December last year found that more than 90% of the respondents agreed that the landslide victory in the election was due to the [frontline protestors](#), who had made sacrifices for the movement in place of the moderates. The existence of widespread support for the protests is also evidenced in the [HK\\$70 million](#) (approximately US\$9 million) raised on a fund-raising platform to support frontline protestors.

Protestors' actions legitimised and government actions delegitimised

Radical frontline protestors and their actions were legitimised in the AEL Movement, providing them with more leeway for actions and relative moral impunity.

The government's appeals to law and order gave rise to intensified police operations, which included, but were not limited to, stepped-up stop-and-search activities, the escalated use of force (the frequent use of tear gas, rubber bullets, bean bag rounds, and sponge grenades), deployment of undercover police officers disguised as protestors, and mass arrests. It also tried to present the radical/frontline protestors as *Baotu* 暴徒 - 'rioters' and commented that they '[have no stake in society](#)'.

The Hong Kong administration has claimed the restoration of law and order as its utmost priority. This is shown in the officially announced directive of *Zhi bao zhi luan* 止暴制亂 - 'Stop violence and chaos' with aims to regain control of the situation. In spite of the widespread allegations of misconduct against the police force (as investigated and reported by [Amnesty International](#) and The [Washington Post](#)), the Hong Kong government repeatedly expressed its full support to their operations. In fact, to further strengthen the operational ability of police, the government invoked the emergency law for the first time since the handover to introduce an anti-mask law which gave the police further powers of arrest. In addition, a pilot scheme which concerns the appointment of special constables was introduced to 'enhance the Police's manpower and strength...in [stopping violence and curbing disorder](#)'.

The government did try to reach a political compromise by holding a community dialogue with the presence of senior government officials (including Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam) in late September. But it had little prospect of success as it was widely seen as a tactic to splinter the movement. The introduction of the anti-mask law on the heels of the dialogue in early October made the protestors question the sincerity of the authority in reaching a compromise. The protestors then

claimed that only the realisation of their demands could scale down of the movement.

The Hong Kong administration appears to be suffering from legitimacy deficiency in the eyes of the general public. A [survey](#) conducted with more 700 respondents aged 18 or above by the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong found that respondents who reported distrust in the administration have increased from 25.7% in December 2018 to 59% in December 2019. The lack of legitimacy made the government's efforts to restore law and order and portray the frontline protestors as rioters unappealing, particularly so when the wider public saw the administration and the police force as powerful oppressors. It can be suggested in the movement slogan of *Meiyou baotu, zhiyou baozheng* 沒有暴徒，只有暴政 - 'No rioters, only tyranny', as identified by a vast majority of participants in the movement.

The intensified police operations were thus conceived as oppressions of the state in the pretext of law and order and made the conflict appear not just as one between the administration and radical frontline protestors but as one between the state/administration and all the Hong Kong people. As such, instead of being viewed as fringe extremists, the frontline protestors were usually presented by the wider public as heroes or victims, and the movement was heavily tinged with a sense of comradeship, with participants calling each other as *Shouzu* 手足 - 'comrade/compatriot'. The negative image of the police operations was capitalised on by the protestors to further delegitimize the opponents, bestowing the actions of the radical protestors with further legitimacy and moral worth. The fact that the protestors were seen as the underdogs pursuing for a just and popular cause brought symbolic capital to the radical protestors: while any achievement in operations or concession from the administration was seen as the efforts of the radical protestors, any failure or repression from the administration was viewed as victimhood and generated sympathy in society.

I argue that the interactive dynamics between the transnational political

environment, movement actors and security forces account for the onset and reinforcement of the radicalisation of the movement. The anti-China sentiment in the international arena helped create moral capital for the protestors' violence in the eyes of the international community. The action-counteraction dynamics between the protestors and the police force added to the former's ability to challenge the security apparatus and to use violence to respond. As the support for the protestors' cause reached critical mass, the violent tactics did not have a devastating impact on the protestors' image - the movement gained ground in public opinion as the government resorted to law and order.

As things stand, unless there are drastic changes in the narratives relating to China in the international arena and in the tactics of the Hong Kong administration in handling the political dispute, violence and radical means of protest in Hong Kong may subside for the time being, but will surely remain.

Main image: Demonstrators wearing the masks representing the mascots of the movement (pepe frog and protest pig) with the hand gesture representing 'Five Demands' . Credit: Jimmy Lam @ USP United Social Press 社媒