

# Lessons From Hong Kong: A City That Protests Must Know Itself

Strategies of mass outreach and efficiently utilising local knowledge lie at the heart of the success of the sustained protests.

SADAF WANI | SCROLL

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2019 was a remarkable year for Hong Kong. Alarmed by a bill that proposed to extradite suspects and criminals to mainland China for prosecution, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region experienced its largest, most consistent protests till date. The demonstrations have continued since June 2019, with several events attracting more than two million people.

How has Hong Kong sustained the momentum of the protests for over seven months? And what can protestors in other parts of the world learn about managing mass movements of such scale and magnitude?

The protests have not simmered down even though the controversial extradition bill was withdrawn in September 2019. The extended demands of the protestors are reflected in their slogan, "Five demands, not one less." The protestors are demanding an independent investigation into instances of police brutality; the retraction of the classification of protestors as "rioters"; amnesty for arrested protestors; and the implementation of the promised universal suffrage.

Though few realise it, Hong Kong has seen over 50,000 protests of variable nature since 1997, according to sociologist, Daniel Garrett. That is when the British handed over Hong Kong to People's Republic of China in 1997, under an arrangement known as "one country, two systems". Under its terms, Hong Kong would be allowed limited democracy and the freedom of speech, press and protest that are denied to residents of mainland China.

The agreement is set to expire in 2047, which is when Hong Kong's semi-autonomous status, will be fully subsumed by China. However, China has been trying to ready Hong Kong for its eventual merger before the due time, a move which many in Hong Kong resent and are trying to resist.

According to a 2012 report from the Hong Kong Information Service Department, there have been 18 protests a day on average in 2011. The number has been on a steady rise since. In fact, the frequency of these protests has led to Hong Kong being called "The City of Protests".

## Strategies of mass mobilisation

At the heart of Hong Kong's success in organising these large-scale demonstrations are strategies of mass outreach and efficiently utilising local knowledge. The protestors operate with a deep understanding of the city, its streets and road networks, its infrastructure and its city spaces. They are able to use this knowledge to design protest maps throughout the city as well as to navigate through the city during demonstrations and clashes with the police. The protests are constantly adapting to the constraints and requirements of the



surroundings, and their protest maps are also kept flexible. Kung fu master Bruce Lee's dictum "Be Water", which emphasises the importance of formlessness and shapelessness, is the guiding principle of the movement.

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Protestors carry detailed maps of streets and roads of the city. These maps also help them in choosing safe entry and exit points to demonstrations across the city. The online maps are frequently updated with warnings about areas that are affected by tear gas. Similarly, there is also coordination regarding the restrictions on entry and exits of subway stations across the city.

The timely transmission of crucial information to fellow protestors through social media has been a successful strategy of the movement. Protestors have been coordinating through closed groups on social media and heavily encrypted apps like Telegram. Even dating apps like Tinder have been used to mobilise protestors. Hong Kong has a multi-category forum website called LI-HKG, which has been a widely popular tool for sharing information. In areas with problems in internet connectivity, protestors rely on offline messaging

apps like Bridefy and utilise Bluetooth connectivity with options like Apple AirDrop service to share maps and other crucial information.

The effective use of social media has also enabled the protestors to take an active charge of their representation and popularise their narrative. The creative use of artwork, posters and photographs has been very helpful in managing the optics of the movement in their favor.

The protestors are conscious of spectators, locally and globally. The visuals that emanate from the demonstrations address them both. Thus the icons and photographs of the movement are carefully curated. The aesthetic appeal of crowd movements is operationalised to create spectacular visuals that get attached with the name of the movement. In this regard using props like yellow umbrellas, flashlights, Guy Fawkes Masks have been quite successful. By making them iconic and relatable, these tactics are able to challenge classifications of protestors as vandals.

## The city is to be claimed

In Hong Kong, the protestors have displayed the need for inhabitants to understand their city. Residents can negotiate with power structures more efficiently once they have an understanding of what makes them and their city valuable. When the ethos of the city is threatened, this knowledge can become very critical in shaping a strategy of resistance. When the demonstrations of June and July did not produce the desired results, the protestors occupied Hong Kong International airport, resulting in cancellation of all international flights. The message of the act emphasised that a city is its people. The act was a warning to all stakeholders, including Beijing and the pro-China gov-

ernment that Hong Kong cannot exist as the "global financial hub" without the cooperation of its people, so they must not go unheard.

The protestors in Hong Kong have refused to be cooped up along the margins of the city where no one will hear them. Instead, march in the main roads, along the head offices of multinational corporations, the legislative complex, shopping malls and public spaces of influence. These are protests of disruption. They disrupt to demand recognition. Through these visible scenes of disruption, they advance their demand for political engagement.

The protestors have marched as a heterogeneous mass with different contributions to make. Some compose a melody. Some write the words, and others sing. This is how the protest anthem of the city, Glory to Hong Kong came to be. People contribute in their individual positions, but they also stand together in the streets. The physical act of coming together and congregating at demonstrations has helped bridge differences.

The protests in Hong Kong are not model for ideal protests worldwide. The movement, like any other, has had its disappointments and low points. But Hong Kong certainly has some crucial lessons to offer in effective strategies of mass mobilisations and how a movement has to keep reinventing itself to sustain.

Cities that protest have the responsibility of understanding themselves, their politics and their people. They have to use their localised settings to determine for themselves what constitutes an effective protest.

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In these first few days of 2020 I have been thinking about the complexities of life. Maybe it is a sign that I'm getting older — but it is a sign I like to think that I am getting wiser. And wisdom, after all, supposedly comes with age.

How quick are we to judge things as simply being black or white. What is or what isn't. What's good and what's bad.

## But life isn't like that.

In the news, we hear of people being described in simple terms, good or bad. Or philosophies as being good or evil. And the older I get, the more I believe those terms are more akin. No, life is full of colour and there are many, many shades of grey — more than those fifty so famously put into salacious sentences during the years of the Twenty Teens. Those terms are now, I believe, part of that fake news syndrome that, by its very nature, labels events are simply true or false.

*There is a danger that extremists who believe in their cause of good or evil, truth or falsehood, light and darkness, will unleash forces that will have repercussions on too many in too many places for too much time to come*

- Mick O'Reilly

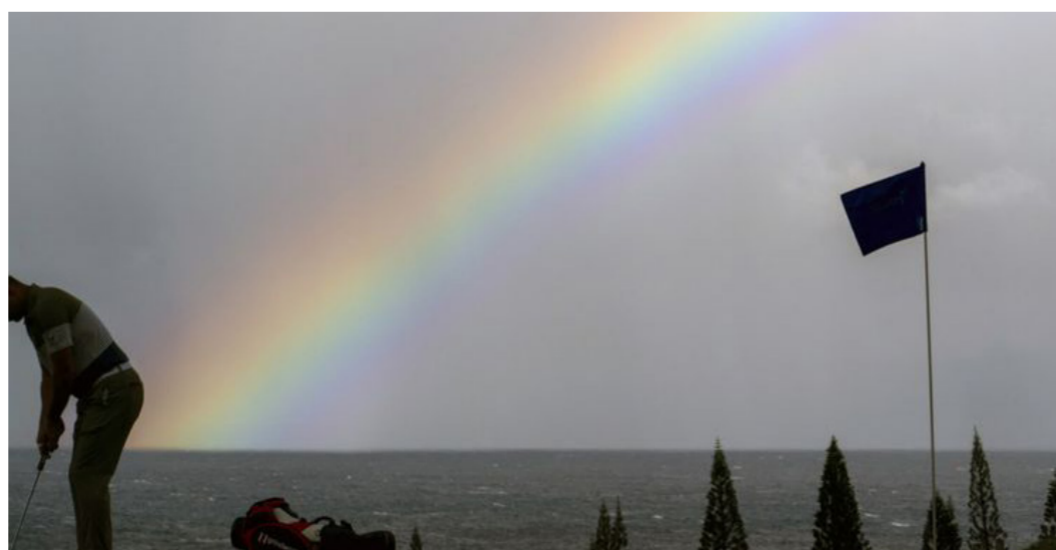
Life isn't like that, a list of truths of falsehoods that either are or are not, where the answer is either a 'yes' or a 'no'.

Gaelic is an interesting language. There is no word for 'yes' and none for 'no'. Instead the answer is more nuanced.

Is the sky blue? In English, the answer would be 'yes'. In Gaelic, the answer is 'it is'. The difference is subtle, but speaks to the complexities of life. 'Yes' is far more definitive than 'it is', which seems to allow

# Life Is Full Of Colour And Complexities

MICK O'REILLY | GULF NEWS



for other colours and clouds that add to the dimensions of the skies above our heads.

## Complicating families

And isn't life like that too — so many dimen-

sions that complicate our families, our homes, where we live and how we react with one another.

Families are such an example. We may have very distinct opinions that colour our judgements in the most definitive of fashions — but there's al-

ways room for compromise, for giving and taking, not being so black and white. The same holds true with those we work with. And the same holds true when it comes to the complexities of international relations — there can be no black and white, no extremes, no wholly good, no fully evil.

There are events unfolding now in these first days of this new decade that are a cause for worry. Tensions are escalating, emotions are running high. And there is a danger that extremists who believe in their cause of good or evil, truth or falsehood, light and darkness, will unleash forces that will have repercussions on too many in too many places for too much time to come.

No, now is the time when we must look at the complexities and see commonalities between us, not differences.

## Think sensibly

It is far too easy to act rashly than to think sensibly.

As impulsive teens, we seek quick and simple fixes to problems, often choosing the wrong path in our search for justice or right. And too often those impulses only exacerbate bad situations, making them worse.

If there is one truth that is universal, it is that time itself is a great healer — and that is a wisdom that only comes with time. Quick fixes are temporary and only often make a bad situation worse.

In time, things don't look so bad. The effects aren't as bad as we first judge them. Or, as someone far wiser once said, things always look better in a new dawn. What seems to be in a bad light now looks a lot different when passed through the prism of time.

A rainbow is a dark cloud seen through the sky's prism.