Political Opportunities, Social Mobilization and Collective Action: The Re-invigorated Pro-Democracy Movement in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper examines the wave of large-scale demonstrations which occurred in Hong Kong between 2003 and 2007, and which can be considered as forming the core of a reinvigorated pro-democracy movement in the city. The paper discusses the macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors which contributed to the rise of the demonstrations. At the macro-level, it is argued that changing political opportunities in the city have led to the formation of an alliance between political elites within the
institutions and movement activists “on the streets.” Organizationally, evidence from onsite surveys illustrates the “self-mobilization” processes behind the demonstrations. While movement organizations are important in organizing the protests, media and interpersonal channels are more important in actually encouraging people to participate. At the micro-level, evidence from both onsite and population surveys is used to examine the social psychological factors behind protest participation. It is argued that the current wave of demonstrations has shown signs of sustainability. Yet the limitations of their actual influence are also discussed.

Introduction

Large-scale demonstrations have been one of the most prominent features of Hong Kong politics since the historic 1 July rally in 2003. More than half a million citizens marched on the streets on that day to protest against the national security legislation and government incompetence in handling various social and economic crises. In 2004, two public demonstrations calling for a faster pace of democratization were organized on 1 January and 1 July. They registered the participation of some 100,000 and 200,000 citizens respectively. The year 2005 saw the resignation of the highly unpopular Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. No major social or political crisis broke out. The economy of Hong Kong also showed signs of sustainable recovery. But despite these “demobilizing” conditions, 20,000 citizens participated in the third consecutive 1 July demonstration. Then, one week before the Legislative Council (LegCo) was to vote on the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government’s political reform proposal, nearly 100,000 citizens took to the streets on 4 December 2005. They criticized the proposal as overly conservative and called for a concrete timetable for institutionalizing direct elections of the Chief Executive and the whole of LegCo. Finally, on 1 July 2006, about 40,000 Hong Kong citizens demonstrated again to call for more rapid democratization.1

These large-scale demonstrations can be considered as forming the core of a new pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Here, it is important first to clarify the meanings of certain key terms. A “movement,” following the conceptualization by Charles Tilly, refers to a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities by employing specific forms of collective action.2 Such collective action aims at representing the worthiness, unity, numbers, and