

A perspective on Hong Kong for the liberty movement

It is a truism that in the fog of war, truth is usually the first casualty. More importantly in dialectic battles between ideologies and their partisans, reason and liberalism quickly fall by the wayside.

Many in the world have cherished Hong Kong as a beacon of freedom, that has shown how personal freedom, economic liberty and the rule of law can create an environment for human flourishing.

So recent events in Hong Kong are both a tragedy and a heart-warming demonstration of individuals yearning for liberty. It is vital for classical liberals and libertarians to understand where in all this the tragedy lies. Time and again in revolutionary situations, individuals who are consistently liberal advocates of freedom are ultimately crushed by those more adept at manipulating the mob or exercising the naked power of the state.

Conscious of that, many of us who are liberal voices in Hong Kong have not been widely heard as the world has responded to vivid scenes of appalling violence.

“War is the health of the state” and typically civil conflict leads to the growth of the state. The current conflict in Hong Kong has fuelled the exercise of latent power of the state to exercise violence and the refinement of those powers advised by the ultimate sovereign. It has seen the ultimate sovereign use extra-legal means to impair the liberties of people and businesses. There have also been a plethora of proposals in the guise of “solutions” to extend the powers of the government via public spending, new regulation and the confiscation of private property.

Before the protests, government in Hong Kong had gradually expanded its role in the economy, largely abandoning the mantras of “large market small government” and “positive non-interventionism” that had been the foundations for Hong Kong’s distinctive liberties and prosperity. As promises to the population to improve their livelihood expanded and political pay-offs to vested interests became more entrenched, disenchantment with government has grown. The government has strangled the property market and now its proxies threaten complete takeover. Inequality is blamed for Hong Kong’s ills, with the solution proposed being to take from the rich.

The protests five formal demands reduce to two substantive calls for change, withdrawal of the extradition bill and democratic change. There is an implicit call for a reassertion of “two systems” that strengthens the rule of law and less interference from the Central People’s Government.

Yet despite these goals, it must be understood that an objective of some within the protests has been to de-legitimise the government, provoke excessive responses from police, undermine the rule of law and move the window of policy possibility far towards more collectivist alternatives. As the “minority rule” would predict, in the movement resisting the government “the most intolerant win”. This has led to wild excesses from the “frontline” initiating and provoking violence and widening property damage.

Like the state, some protesters have gone beyond boycotts to attack businesses that they saw being opposed to their approved line. Independent views have been silenced. In private and institutions across the city, people are as cautious expressing views about the protesters as they are about China. “Doxing” is a practice abused by both sides.

Whilst those resisting the government legitimately fear “white terror”, there are others equally concerned that there are echoes of phases in the cultural revolution from excesses by a minority of protesters.

China’s propaganda machinery has demonised the few more peaceful advocates of freedom and worked hard to associate them with the violent excesses of conveniently nameless protesters. Violent protesters have played into the hands of those wanting to expand state power. Both the

standards of tolerated violence and limits to the power of government in the name of “solutions” have shifted dramatically away from liberty. It is little wonder that some leftist writers are celebrating the end of neo-liberal Hong Kong.

Behind the events in Hong Kong, there is the larger issue of a China regime that has turned away from reforms that once dramatically liberalised the economy and increased personal freedoms. Hong Kong can be seen as a bulwark for resistance against this new direction in China. Yet here there is a real dilemma. Hong Kong can survive on the periphery, but within an authoritarian China. It has done so with practical freedoms that others in China can only dream of and that shine even in comparison with many countries in the “west”. Hong Kong can preserve access to the rule of law and as the model of an alternative for the rest of China.

However, this entrepot role is an affront to both hardliners within China concerned about a liberal capitalist fifth column and also to idealists outside who seek the perfectibility of a Hong Kong that has been free, without being democratic.

Friends from the worldwide classical liberal and libertarian movement have shown heart-warming concern about Hong Kong and a desire to use their profile and voice to help. However, it is important to ground that support on classical liberal foundations. This must start with a foundation in freedom and individual rights. It must give primacy to the non-aggression principle. A libertarian response must reinforce the central role of the individual, property rights and market solutions, not politics.

The classical liberal response will see government at the core of many problems in Hong Kong. However, where “frontline” protests also breach rights, are not peaceful and where protest solutions lead to outcomes that would undermine freedom, that cannot be supported.

If Hong Kong remains a pawn in a geopolitical struggle between competing world powers, liberty will be lost.

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