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**'INNER-PARTY DIFFERENCES ON HONG KONG ISSUE POSE PROBLEMS FOR XI JINPING'**

by JAYADEVA RANADE

China's leadership will have been incensed by the photographs and videos of protestors in Hong Kong carrying American flags and chanting "America please take over Hong Kong" on September 9, in apparent escalation of the protests against Chinese rule by millions of Hong Kong residents that have continued over fifteen weekends in the adverse glare of international media publicity. It would have underscored the concerns of senior and veteran leaders at the annual gathering in Beidaihe of a 'colour revolution'.

On September 10, protestors in Hong Kong 'adopted' a new 'anthem' for Hong Kong, which attracted over 700,000 views overnight and is being spontaneously sung by crowds in public places. The following day the state-owned 'China Daily' posted a notice on its official Facebook account warning that protestors in Hong Kong have secret plans to escalate protests from September 11 with "massive" terrorist attacks including blowing up gas pipelines in Hong Kong and attacks on non-Cantonese speaking people.

Xi Jinping's apparent hesitation in taking action to quell the protests in Hong Kong is suggestive of differences within China's top leadership, namely the Politburo (PB) and Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Xi Jinping is reported to have remarked in mid-August that the person responsible for the trouble in Hong Kong should resolve it – hinting at the seventh ranking PBSC member Han Zheng who is responsible for Hong Kong and Macau affairs.

The tenor of reporting by Chinese-owned news outlets affiliated to different leadership factions in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provided other indications of differences in China's top leadership echelons. The US-based *Duo Wei News (DW News)* and *HK01* in Hong Kong, both owned by Yu Pinhai who owns a lot of theatres in China, are controlled by Xi Jinping's group. The US-based Boxun is affiliated with former Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

In a subtly critical report *HK01* pointed out that PBSC member Han Zheng directly manages Hong Kong affairs and that his visit to Shenzhen on June 30 was the first by a senior Chinese leader since the protests started in Hong Kong on July 1, which

“reflects the attention that Beijing is paying to Hong Kong”. It added that whenever there was a big event in Hong Kong in the past, some top CCP leader would be present in Shenzhen to ‘supervise’ the work. Clashes between Hong Kong protestors and police have, incidentally, occurred since June 1. On July 5, it reported that Han Zheng had returned to Beijing and work to handle the situation in Hong Kong had begun. *HK01* said the top leadership had been caught unawares by the developments in Hong Kong!

Separately, *Epoch Times* (July 20) quoted a ‘princeling’ in Beijing as saying that some top CCP officials had tried to force Chinese President Xi Jinping to make mistakes. They had suggested the use of force and the military, or that the military take control. He said Xi Jinping was, however, very clear that there would be no bloodshed and another June 4th event would be avoided at any cost. Major General Chen Daoxiang, Commander of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) stationed in Hong Kong, was reported to have personally conveyed to David Helvey, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian & Pacific Security Affairs, U.S. Department of Defense, on June 13 that Beijing would not use the military. This was confirmed by the official ‘The Paper’, though it added that Chen Daoxiang had “strongly condemned the series of recent incidents of extreme violence in Hong Kong and expressed his attitude with “seven resolute.”

The protests reveal that despite Hong Kong’s reversion to China over twenty years ago neither its citizens nor Beijing yet trust each other and neither have the ‘one country, two systems’ been able to adjust to each other. The Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office and Xinhua, China’s long-time outpost in Hong Kong, were obviously unaware of the extent of public anger. Seemingly so also were pro-Beijing newspapers like *Ta Kung Pao*, *Wen Wei Po*, *Sing Pao Daily News*, *Oriental Daily News*, *Sing Tao Daily* and others. The CCP, which has over the decades penetrated all sections of Hong Kong, similarly failed. This despite large numbers of Hong Kong businessmen being close to it, at least fifteen pro-Beijing groups and associations linked to Chinese provinces, and the CCP controlling the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, the largest in Hong Kong. Reports reveal that since the end of July more than a dozen officials from Beijing’s offices who are stationed in Hong Kong, including the CCP Liaison Office in Hong Kong and the State Council’s Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, have been punished and some even dismissed.

Initially China banned all reporting on the protests by its official domestic media, but later instructed them to focus on the “violence” and describe the protests as foreign-funded. Conscious of international opinion, Beijing used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter etc. To mobilise favourable public opinion it organised rallies by pro-Beijing students and prominent personalities abroad and persuaded Hong Kong businessmen and firms to advertise condemning the violence. China’s media publicised that overseas Chinese organizations in U.K., Southern California, Bangladesh, Hungary, Madagascar, Madrid etc had criticised interference in China’s internal affairs.

Beijing's position has visibly hardened in recent weeks. Servers of the Hong Kong-based online discussion forum, LIHKG, used by the protestors to mobilize and organize their actions, have come under unprecedented DDoS attacks. LIHKG said "there is a power, or even a national level power behind the attacks as botnets from all over the world were manipulated in launching this attack." Cathay Pacific, whose employees participated in the protests, was issued a "significant aviation safety risk warning" by the Civil Aviation Administration of China causing a sharp drop in its shares. Reports and photographs of the People's Armed Police (PAP) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducting manoeuvres outside neighbouring Shenzhen implied a hint of military action.

Prompted by its apprehension of the past couple of years of the West's intentions further accentuated by the US-China Trade War, China quickly labelled the protests as inspired by foreign forces and part of the West's efforts to provoke a "colour revolution" -- a term used to describe the movements to topple governments in Eastern Europe and Egypt, but not often used in China since 1990-91 till January this year by Xi Jinping. Hong Kong's *Ming Pao* News reported (August 17) that at their annual gathering at Beidaihe, veteran CCP cadres reached a consensus to define the anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong as a 'colour revolution' "led by military and political intelligence agencies from multiple nations and regions" with the CCP as the target. *Ming Pao* said they felt the Hong Kong Government may not be capable of handling the protests within a limited time and Beijing can, under the law, provide all needed "assistance." Among those who attended were former Chinese Presidents Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin.

Yang Guang, spokesman for the State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, said on September 3, that the protests have "clear features of a colour revolution" and the goal is to paralyse the Hong Kong government, seize the power for governing the Special Administrative Region (SAR) and make "one country, two systems" an empty concept. Separately, Zhang Dinghuai, a Professor of Hong Kong and Macao Studies at Shenzhen University, listed the elements of colour revolutions adding that the protests in Hong Kong include many of these features and defy China's Constitution.

Speaking at his pro-government 'Our Hong Kong Foundation' on July 31, former Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa said, "Looking at the political storm closely – its severity, scale, and organisation – it's reasonable to believe that it's fanned by someone from behind. Various signs are pointing at Taiwan and the US". Claiming that foreign politicians and anti-China forces have tried to incite fear of the Chinese Communist Party and turn Hongkong into a base to resist the central government, he asserted that "a small number of people" are trying "to damage the relationship between the central government and the SAR", and such acts are unacceptable.

In the backdrop of continuous threats that Beijing will reunify Taiwan with the Mainland by force if required, Taiwan is monitoring the developments very

carefully. The protests have boosted Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's popularity ahead of the upcoming elections in January. Interesting was her response to media reports of Hong Kong protestors arriving in Taiwan. She said "These friends from Hong Kong will be treated in an appropriate way on humanitarian grounds."

Other indications of Beijing's toughened stance include an article in the Chinese-language official *Global Times* (August 17) hinting that the 'leaders' of the movement would be punished. It listed: (i) Jimmy Lai for meeting with Pence, Pompeo, and Bolton in July and publishing anti-extradition statements in the *New York Times*; (ii) Martin Lee Chu-ming for meeting with Pompeo in May and Julie Eadeh, US Consulate General, in Hong Kong in August; (iii) Anson Chan, for meeting with Pence, Pelosi, and representatives from the National Security Bureau; for appealing and calling on the U.S. to put pressure on Beijing in March as well as meeting with Julie Eadeh in August; (iv) Albert Ho Chun-yan for attending the protest in Yuen Long in July and meeting with a male foreigner in August; (v) Joshua Wong Chi-fung for meeting with Julie Eadeh in August; and for inciting violence during the protests; (vi) Nathan Law Kwun-chung for making up rumors to endanger the police force; for calling on the public to participate in the protest through social media; and for meeting Julie Eadeh in August; and (vii) Alex Chow Yong-kang for his speech in the U.S. in March in which he stated that there is no democracy and freedom in Hong Kong; for calling on the U.S. House of Representatives to further study the development of Hong Kong democracy; and for participating in protest activities in front of the Chinese consulate in New York in August.

On August 21, Zang Tiewei, spokesman of the Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, dismissed the possibility of acceding to the demand for universal suffrage and reiterated that "Recently, some illegal criminals in Hong Kong have openly attacked the legislature, violently attacked the police, and wilfully beat innocent people. These acts are serious crimes in any country under the rule of law and will be punished according to the law."

The protests have damaged Hongkong's economy lessening its importance to China. Large numbers of businessmen have moved their wealth out and the number of visitors to Hongkong has fallen since June. Official data released on August 16 showed that Hong Kong's GDP growth for the second quarter dipped to 0.5% year on year, the lowest in more than seven years and the value of goods exported and imported via Hongkong in the first half of 2019, fell 3.6% and 4.5% year-on-year respectively. Hongkong officials assess that Hongkong is on the verge of recession amid social unrest and the escalating trade war.

The continuing protests have undoubtedly severely embarrassed China's leadership and become a test case for legitimacy of the CCP. Chinese President Xi Jinping cannot allow them to drag on without hurting his position. Though international opinion is important, Beijing will be more sensitive to the potential fall-out of the protests inside China and on Taiwan. Beijing will probably try and use Hong Kong's forces to deter others and restore calm in Hong Kong. China will not like to see its

70<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary celebrations on October 1, marred by disorder.

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