

HONG KONG PROTESTS

THE UMBRELLA REVOLT, ACT II

Key points

- On March 29, 2019, the Hong Kong government officially introduced the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill. This bill would allow for criminal suspects to be extradited to the Chinese mainland.
- What is known as the “*Anti-Extradition Bill movement*” began on April 28, 2019. Those large series of demonstrations were sparked by the fear over Beijing’s growing influence on Hong Kong’s legal system.
- The protests, mainly led by students, quickly escalated from tens of thousands in March to millions of protestors by June 2019, becoming the largest demonstrations in Hong Kong’s history.
- The demonstrators achieved their first key demand: the full withdrawal of the extradition bill in September 2019.
- International Organisations report widespread use of violence against protestors.

Context

The anger that exploded in 2019 did not come out of nowhere. It had been building up for years. Back in 1997, when Britain handed Hong Kong over to China, both sides agreed that Hong Kong would keep its freedoms under the “*One Country, Two Systems*” model.



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These included fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and the right to protest, rights that were not available in mainland China. They were supposed to remain in place until 2047, but many in Hong Kong felt they were being eroded much earlier. People increasingly perceived growing interference from Beijing in the media, universities, and politics. In addition, the memory of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre has long served as a symbol of anti-Beijing sentiment and continues to inspire resistance.

On March 29, 2019, these tensions came to a head when the Hong Kong government proposed an extradition bill that would allow criminal suspects to be sent to mainland China. A million demonstrators gathered in Hong Kong on June 9, 2019 to denounce the bill.

The movement soon adopted five clear demands: withdrawal of the bill, refraining from labeling the protests as “riots,” the release of arrested protesters, an investigation into police conduct, and the implementation of genuine democratic elections. Despite police attempts to suppress them with force, the demonstrations continued until late 2020.

ROLE OF STUDENTS AND YOUTH



Protester during the Kwong Tong March, 25 August 2019, Wikimedia commons/ Studio Incendo

While the 2019 protests mobilized people across all sectors of Hong Kong society, students played a major and highly visible role. Many of the most important actions, including front-line clashes with police and university occupations, were led by young protesters, primarily university and secondary school students.

As the movement intensified, class boycotts spread across campuses, and several universities became symbolic battlegrounds. Among them, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CHUK) and Polytechnic University saw violent confrontations between protesters and police, especially after a police raid at CUHK in November 2019 provoked widespread outrage and a wave of resistance. These students were not only demanding the withdrawal of the extradition bill, but also greater democracy, police accountability, and the protection of Hong Kong’s freedoms.



Police and protestors during anti-totalitarianism rally, 29 September 2019, Wikimedia commons/ Studio Incendo

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

The first demand, the withdrawal of the extradition bill, was met in September 2019. But the rest were ignored. On June 16, two million people (according to the organizers) marched peacefully, showing just how broad the movement had become.

The government's refusal to engage meaningfully, combined with police violence (including the use of tear gas for the first time on June 12 in Admiralty and Central neighborhoods) marked a dramatic escalation. That same day, protesters who were arrested were charged with riot, a first since the movement began. Demonstrations were met with disproportionate police violence, including tear gas, batons, rubber bullets, water cannons, and widespread arrests (over 1,300 people).

Amnesty International reports on these actions, stating that the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality, when it comes to police intervention, were violated.

A TURNING POINT:



Residents cross the street in front of a wall of campaign banners for the district council elections in Hong Kong on December 10, 2023. Vernon Yuen/NurPhoto/Getty Images

A major political shift came with the District Council elections on November 24, 2019, framed as a de facto referendum on the protests. With over 2.9 million voters, the elections resulted in a landslide victory for pro-democracy candidates, revealing massive public support for the movement.

However, on June 30, 2020, China imposed its National Security Law, effectively criminalizing dissent, enabling mass arrests, and silencing meaningful democratic opposition. The implementation of this legislation marked a significant shift in Hong Kong's governance. It led to the disqualification of opposition candidates, the closure of several civil society groups, and a narrowing of the political and civic space that had previously characterized the city's semi-autonomous status.

A LEADERLESS MOBILIZATION?

One notable aspect of the mobilization was the "leaderless" structure, which relied on small, and agile networks. In fact, Johnson Ching-Yin Yeung, democracy movement organiser, described it as a "leader-full" movement, arguing that coordination occurred through numerous informal groups rather than a central hierarchy. Because decisions were made within these flexible decentralized networks, the movement was able to react quickly to changing circumstances on the ground and adapt its tactics in real time.

Furthermore, digital platforms played a crucial role in facilitating this structure. Protesters extensively used encrypted messaging apps like Telegram to organize actions and maintain anonymity. Group administrators within these apps effectively assumed leadership roles, coordinating logistics and ensuring operational security.

In an interview, Nathan Law, a pro-democracy activist, highlighted the strategic use of online forums and social media to disseminate information and rally support. He noted that this digital mobilization was instrumental in sustaining the movement's momentum and engaging the international community. Additionally, the movement's adaptability was evident in its tactics.

Protesters employed a "Be Water" strategy, characterized by fluid and spontaneous actions, allowing them to evade police crackdowns and maintain pressure on the authorities. This approach was facilitated by real-time communication and a shared understanding of objectives among participants. Despite lacking a formal leadership structure, the Hong Kong protests were marked by sophisticated organization, leveraging technology and grassroots networks to coordinate large-scale actions effectively.

TO SUM-UP:

The 2019 protests were a turning point in Hong Kong's history. Although the movement achieved the withdrawal of the extradition bill and raised global attention, it faced intensified repression following the implementation of the National Security Law by the Beijing government. Even so, the movement left a lasting mark. The courage of young people, especially students, became a powerful image of resistance. As activist Benny Tai said: *"There will be darker times ahead for Hong Kong, but the sun will rise again."*



Copyright Benoit Barral, 19 January 2020 in Hong Kong

WHY WAS THE MOVEMENT NOT SUCCESSFUL?



The siege at PolyU began on Sunday as part of a broader campaign of massive disruption across Hong Kong.

While the 2019 Hong Kong protests captured global attention and demonstrated immense public will, the movement ultimately failed to achieve most of its demands. Several factors explain this outcome.

- The power dynamic was deeply lopsided. Protesters faced one of the world's most powerful authoritarian regimes, equipped with full control over security forces, media, and legal tools.
- Repression came swiftly: Beijing imposed the National Security Law in 2020, criminalizing dissent, dismantling civil society, and removing democratic representatives.
- Internationally, while many governments voiced concern, few took concrete action, fearing economic fallout from challenging China.

LESSONS LEARNED:

A few takeaways from the Hong Kong 2019 revolutionary movement:

- **The need for strategic unity:** the Hong Kong movement included a broad range of actors: students, moderates, radicals, politicians, but lacked a coordinated leadership or common platform. Greater internal cohesion might have strengthened negotiations and preserved momentum.
- **Building international alliances:** symbolic support matters, but more could have been done to pressure external governments to take real action: through targeted sanctions, diplomatic protection for activists, or international legal complaints. Raising the costs of repression, even symbolically, can shift global narratives and increase long-term pressure.
- **Importance of economic leverage:** Hong Kong's status as a global financial hub could have offered opportunities for disruption; through strikes, boycotts, or coordinated economic actions, though these would have implied massive risk and coordination.

At the end of the day, the movement showed the limits of protest under authoritarian rule but also the lasting power of mass mobilization, civic courage, and the need for smart, adaptable resistance.

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