

Asia Rising – Hong Kong

Professor Nick Bisley, Executive Director – La Trobe Asia

Matt Smith

Hello podcast listeners, this podcast of Asia Rising is brought to you by La Trobe Asia, they've got a public lecture on next week on Tuesday 14th October at 6 pm at the State Library of Victoria. The topic will be Power, Rivalry and the Transformation of Asia, and the speaker will be the host of this podcast, Professor Nick Bisley. You can find out more information at the La Trobe Asia website, that's: latrobe.edu.au/asia

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast where we examine the news events and general happenings of Asia's states and societies, I'm your host Professor Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia. Joining me today on the line from Beijing is Doctor Jim Leibold, Senior Lecturer in Chinese Politics and Asian Studies here at La Trobe University. In today's podcast, we look at the popular protests in Hong Kong, their origins, how they've developed and how they may play out.

Professor Nick Bisley

So Jim, It's nearly week three of the protests in Hong Kong, will you let us know to begin with where these came from, what was the origin to this mass protest, what's caused it and what are its underlying dynamics?

Dr Jim Leibold

Yeah, well it's been a long time in the making, briefly speaking it goes back to the 1984 joint statement between the UK and the PRC which outlined the situation on which Hong Kong would be returned to Chinese Sovereignty in 1997, at the crux of the controversy is the provision that eventually, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, which is the top political bureaucrat, would be elected through democratic principles and well as universal suffrage. This provision was put into the basic law, kind of the foundational constitutional document that governs Hong Kong Society under the People's Republic of China, and in it Article 45 stages very clearly that the ultimate aim for the selection of Chief Executive is that of universal suffrage and also said it should be done in accordance with democratic procedures. But it also ambiguous because it also speaks about the Chief Executive being elected by a nominating committee, and essentially since 1997, individuals inside Hong Kong as well as party members in Beijing have been kind of debating how this is to proceed. And the latest protests really got started a couple of months ago when the National People's Congress, the top legislative body in Beijing, made a determination that the Chief Executive in 2017, would be elected using universal suffrage, but it was interpreted in a way in which Beijing, through this nominating committee would still be able to approve any candidate that would then be elected by the populace in Hong Kong, so a lot of people in Hong Kong feel like this is a backtracking on a promise that was initially set forward in the basic law.

Professor Nick Bisley

Yes, so when the deal was struck in the mid 1980's, this famous formula: one country, two systems was put into place in 1997 when it occurred and do you think the view in Hong Kong is that that deal, ie: what it means to have a different system is being eroded?

Dr Jim Leibold

There are a number of things. First thing I think it is really important to point out is that Hong Kong itself is a very divided society. Divisions in terms of economic wealth, you know you get a Gini co-efficiency of over fifty percent, you've got a generation gap, particularly among under 30's, there is

very weak identification with the PRC, with any formal Chinese identity, there is a strong sense of Hong Kong and unique Hong Kong identity, but then you've got business tycoons who've made a fortune off of closer ties to the PRC. And so Hong Kong itself is divided but certainly amongst, you know I mean it's hard to put a figure on what percentage we're talking about, but at least over fifty percent of Hong Kong's society feel like since the handover in 1997, that their kind of unique way of life is slowly being encroached upon by this PRC 'baggamen' and so there have been a number of incidents, and this has come to a head most recently over what it means to have universal suffrage of the Chief Executive.

Professor Nick Bisley

Because it's on the back of that 2012 protest, isn't it, where there had been an effort to put in place, or a patriotic education, I can't remember the exact phrase for it but basically, some PRC educational propaganda, into the education system in Hong Kong.

Dr Jim Leibold

There are two previous incidences, in 2003 there was widespread demonstrations and debate over the implementation of something called Article 23; it was a provision in the basic law that required the local government to pass some type of security law. The original draft had a provision for anti-sedition and there were large debates and demonstrations, then eventually the Hong Kong Government scrapped that law, they put it aside, the Chief Executive at the time Tung Chee-hwa resigned as did the Security Minister Regina Ip. So that happened in 2003 and then again in 2012 when you're talking about, the Hong Kong Government said they would implement mandatory patriotic education classes in all the schools. Large demonstrations again, I actually was in Hong Kong at that time and people flooded onto the streets in tens of thousands and once again the government backed down, so you can understand why the students now feel like these demonstrations might lead somewhere, because twice previously they demonstrated and they've managed to get the government to back down.

But the difference here, and I think it's a really important one, is they're not dealing with the Hong Kong Government per se, they are dealing with Beijing now, it was Beijing the National People's Congress that made this determination on the provisions of which the Chief Executive would be elected in 2017. You're dealing with a very different creature in Beijing, and the new leader Xi Jinping who is very reticent to back down, so you're at a kind of a standstill. Right now, at present I think Xi is willing to allow the Chief Executive CY Leung (Chun-Ying Leung) to handle this, I think you realise the stakes of any intervention by Beijing are quite high. At present it seems unclear what the end game is here. How is this going to end?

Professor Nick Bisley

So, do you think this is the first real test of Xi Jinping's leadership, at least from an international point of view, the first big public test of his resolve?

Dr Jim Leibold

It certainly is a massive test, he's encountered other tests and he's certainly come to office as possibly the strongest president and party secretary since perhaps Deng Xiaoping, and I think this really, through his administration, came out of left field, it could have been anticipated, but they certainly, since coming to power they've certainly taken a tough line on Hong Kong. In the summer they issued a white paper on Hong Kong that essentially said that, Hong Kong continues to exist at the behest of Beijing and the Chinese Communist Party and is just another city within the PRC. It's going to be a big test, he's in a very difficult position. Certainly he wants to be strong on this issue and I don't think there's any room for him to back down because he worries about the message it might send to others across China as well as those in the periphery of Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as the issue of Taiwan and the South China Seas, the East China Seas, he's a kind of Putinesk kind of strong man, so there's no room to back down here, but at the same time how do you resolve this

issue? He is looking to CY Leung in the Hong Kong Government to find a way to resolve this but if the students and other protestors don't back down it seems that some type of use of force is inevitable. But hopefully that is done by the Hong Kong police without the intervention of the large PLA contingency.

Professor Nick Bisley

Yeah, it would be to me, if that does occur if the crackdown is coming and by the sounds of what you said about Xi Jinping and the stakes he's got in this it seems that unless the protestors back down this is an inevitability, but it would seem that politically for Beijing the best thing to do would be, it's the Hong Kong people doing it not the PLA. From your view of the actual protest itself, you know it's been quite an unusual and contemporary social protest, it seems to be quite distinctive in a lot of ways, what's caught your eye about the protests so far?

Dr Jim Leibold

Well, in some ways it's not that dissimilar to the protests that occurred in Beijing and elsewhere across China in 1989 and I think that is a kind of scary parallel, it's kind of 'the elephant in the room' that everyone is aware of, but I see some similarities and differences. The similarities are the fact that this is a broad coalition of different people demonstrating, it really got started or pushed back after the Global Financial Crisis amongst a coalition of socialist groups, but you've got now teachers involved as well as pro-democracy legislators, and what really kind of added new momentum to these demonstrations was about a week ago when a whole different coalition of students joined the demonstrations. That really changes the dynamics, because here we're talking about young kids at the forefront using civil disobedient tactics, blocking entrance to roads and government buildings and so in that regard it's not that dissimilar to the scenes in Beijing in 1989, you've got a very fluid, very diverse group of protestors, no clear leadership, no really clear aims, I mean they're calling for the Chief Executive to step down, they're asking for a reinterpretation of the basic law, if you like the calls for a democracy in 1989 it's not really clear how these things would be implemented. The difference here is we're dealing with very strong leadership, it wasn't in place in 1989, the question now is how do you bring it to an end, and you've seen various tactics, the first was to go hard with tear gas and pepper spray by the anti-riot police in Hong Kong, and then a couple of days ago, they appeared to call in the Triads. It seems that each of those, the tear gas and the Triads have just kind of galvanised the students further. It's not clear as we sit here on Monday what's going to happen. The Chief Executive called for the students to clear the way this morning, it's my understanding from just checking twitter before we started our conversation, the students are still on the ground and they're allowing government officials to go back to work but they're still blocking roads, they're determined not to give up.

Professor Nick Bisley

Yeah from what I can see, it seems like there've been a few tactical retreats in the far flung parts of the protest, because you've got the ones on the Kowloon side and Mong Kok and elsewhere that seem to be scaled down, whereas I think the main site, as it were, in central if anything, has been beefed up, so at the moment it doesn't look like there's any compromise from the student point of view. I'm curious, what's the view in Beijing, I mean, you're there and I know you have access to information that you're average citizen doesn't have, but I mean, is this being talked about, do people know about it?

Dr Jim Leibold

It's a good question, I've just got back from Taiwan, the Taiwan people were all abuzz about this, obviously with a bit of fear of what that might mean with their relationship with Beijing, but here it's certainly not on the front pages of any of the newspapers, it's not been covered, censored on social media, some of the stuff inevitably has to filter through, particularly over the border into Guangdong, I would suspect, but The Party say it's doing its best to sensor and block this and keep

this separate, I mean they've made some statements in the People's Daily in China Daily, but these are statements that are issued towards the reading public outside of the PRC, so I'm not aware of any official media coverage here inside of Beijing in Chinese, I think what they're terrified by the prospects that this could lead to similar demonstrations, not only in the periphery of Xinjiang and Tibet, but even more worrying in Guangzhou or even here in Beijing. I don't see that happening thus far, whether that's because there's a lack of information or a lack of sympathy, it's hard to gauge.

Professor Nick Bisley

The International reaction is also kind of interesting and I think particularly in Hong Kong, I think you've seen some divisions by those with a stake in Hong Kong, on the one hand you've got a cosmopolitan elite who are supporting the pro-democracy movements, but you see these curious statements coming from business groups, particularly Western business groups like the Australian Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, denouncing the protestors, telling them to get out of the streets, telling them to let Hong Kong get on with business and the international reaction to this, not playing quite in the standard pro-China, anti-China way that we've seen other protests play out. Have you got a sense of what that international perspective is?

Dr Jim Leibold

It's very similar to the way I guess Hong Kong's society has reacted, it's divided, I mean on the one hand people are quite sympathetic to the maintenance of the Hong Kong autonomy and some kind of separate Hong Kong identity, but at the same time people realise that if this continues to go on, even if there is a crackdown, this is going to devastate the Hong Kong economy. You've already had the mainland cancel tour groups and tourism is a major source of income, but at the same time the Hang Seng, the stock index has declined, you know this has been going on for quite a long time and has caused disruption in the Hong Kong economy and people realise the stakes are high here. If the PLA were to crack down this would decimate Hong Kong and it's really important role of financial gateway into the PRC, and so the stakes are high not only for business folk in Hong Kong but also the international business community. I don't think anybody wants to see Hong Kong descend into chaos and no-one wants to see a repeat of the crackdown that occurred in 1989 in Beijing.

Professor Nick Bisley

Yeah, it seems that one of the other risks that China's got in terms of how it responds is, it does seem to care about its international public image in a way that perhaps it didn't used to at least in the sense that China's been trying to play this game of being peaceful, wise and we're developing carefully and we're all very poor and we're not a threat to anyone and all that sort of stuff and I think that message gets much harder to sell if you've got a crackdown in Hong Kong and people in Taiwan are sitting there going, 'so tell us again why we should go down the Hong Kong route for reunification', and that sort of thing, so I think there's an added sense of complexity to how Beijing may respond

Dr Jim Leibold

Yeah definitely, and Xi doesn't want that right now and that is an unwelcome intrusion on his larger agenda, mainly domestically focused, but also he's brought a more robust diplomacy to more confident, kind of strident China but it's also a China that wants to be a part of the international community, a leader in some ways, and so this puts him in a very difficult bind. One the one hand he can't back down he's got to look strong, after all Hong Kong is a part of China, but at the same time, look at the implications for China in its place in the world after 1989, so it's certainly the last thing he'd want to once again be cast out as a pariah in the international community which would be exactly what would happen if the PLA was called in and so I think everybody is hoping that the police will be able to deal with it internally. And I suspect they will, I mean at some stage, either it's

going to peter out or the police are going to start arresting people and hauling people away, but it's not going to end this problem, and we've got great polling data that's been done by Michael DeGolyer at Baptist University that's a Hong Kong transition project. He's been tracking the attitudes of particularly the under 30's and under 40's in Hong Kong and he shows us a growing dissatisfaction with encroachment by the PRC and a strengthening of Hong Kong identity. That's not going to change.

Professor Nick Bisley

Yeah it seems that given where he is in his presidential term or his term of leadership at any rate of the party, I think he's got no choice but be pretty firm on this, although there's a bit of latitude for precisely how you demonstrate firmness and the like. But even if we get this one resolved peacefully now, there's more coming over the next five to ten years.

Dr Jim Leibold

What they need to think about is a face saving method at this stage, and one way this could occur is to get rid of CY Leung, he is deeply unpopular, he came to power in 2012 and was immediately involved with this, also the patriotic education protests and all kinds of allegations of corruption, he was supposed to have this house on The Peak that violated planning regulations. There is also talk that he is a sort of underground Chinese Communist, but he's unpopular, he's unpopular in the way he's handled the economy, he's unpopular amongst the students, I mean that's what happened with Tung Chee-hwa after the Articles 23 Demonstration, he resigned claiming health issues. So there is a way here, if he were to step down, and you know, health issues or something like that, rather than being seen to be removed by Beijing, that may nullify the students and the protestors at least in the short term. In the long term, we can just look back over the last couple of decades and these things have come up repeatedly, I can't see it going away.

Professor Nick Bisley

Alright Jim, I think that's all we've got time for, but fantastic for your insights from Beijing and I'll speak to you again doubtless soon about these events and in the future.

Dr Jim Leibold

No problem, happy to join you.

Professor Nick Bisley

You've been listening to Asia Rising Podcast of La Trobe Asia, you can follow Jim on twitter @jleibold and you can follow me on twitter as well @nickbisley. If you like this podcast, why not subscribe at the iTunes store or on SoundCloud. I'm Nick Bisley thanks for listening.