The crisis in Hong Kong: A quest for understanding

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For The Straits Times

Hong Kong has been in turmoil for the past four months. I have tried to understand, in an objective way, the root causes of the crisis. I have identified the following 10 important facts about Hong Kong and about the crisis.

First, the British left defeated China in the Opium War of 1839 to 1842. Under the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, the island of Hong Kong was ceded to the United Kingdom in perpetuity.

Second, China was defeated by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. A weakened China was forced to lease the New Territories to the British for 99 years. The lease expired in 1997.

Third, in 1994, the governments of China and the UK reached an agreement on the future of Hong Kong. The British agreed to return Hong Kong to China in 1997. The Chinese government agreed that the people of Hong Kong would enjoy the rights contained in the United Nations’ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The text of the covenant is part of the domestic law of Hong Kong. Hong Kong would enjoy autonomy for 50 years under the policy of “one country, two systems.”

The agreement between China and the UK is contained in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. The two principal architects of the agreement were Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher.

Fourth, the political system in Hong Kong is based on the Hong Kong Basic Law, which is the equivalent of the territory’s Constitution. The Legislative Council consists of two types of members: 56 per cent of the members, 30 of them, are popularly elected; the other half, another 35, are elected by functional constituencies, such as bankers, lawyers, manufacturers, educators and so on. The Chief Executive is elected by an election committee consisting of 1,200 persons. The Law is based on a bill that drew an estimated 1 million and two million signatures, respectively, to the streets peacefully to demonstrate their desire for a free and fair election.

On June 15, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that the bill had been suspended. On Sept. 4, she announced that it would be withdrawn. But the protest movement demanded her acceptance of four other demands, including dialogue with the government, a withdrawal of all charges, and the establishment of an independent inquiry into the complaints against the police.

The protest movement has been split by the majority, which is peaceful, and a minority, which is increasingly violent. One of the leaders, Joshua Wong, was arrested in August.

WHAT IS THE PROTEST MOVEMENT WANTING?

The protesters want to have universal suffrage and the right to choose their leaders in free elections. They do not want China to have the right to screen the candidates for the post of Chief Executive.

They want to preserve their identity as Hong Kongers and their way of life, including the freedom of speech and of peaceful assembly. They object to China sending agents to Hong Kong to kidnap people who do not like them.

Finally, they want Hong Kong to be a fairer society, with affordable housing, good jobs and a government that is accountable to them.

WHAT DOES CHINA WANT?

China wants the people of Hong Kong to understand that the central government has the power to defend the spirit of China and subject to China’s sovereignty. China will not tolerate any attempt to separate Hong Kong from China. China wants the people of Hong Kong to love China as well as Hong Kong, and that Hong Kong will not allow Hong Kong to be used to subvert China.

The actions by some protesters to burn China’s flag, deface the portrait of its President and attack the premises of its office are totally unacceptable. China also feels that it has done so much for Hong Kong and that Hong Kongers should be grateful and not hostile.

ACOLLISSION OF TENDENCIES

There is a genuine desire on both sides. China tends to emphasise the importance of one country. The young Hong Kongers tend to emphasise the importance of two systems.

The Chinese complain that the young Hong Kongers are not behaving as Chinese citizens should. The young Hong Kongers complain that China has been undermining the integrity of two systems. In Hong Kong, there is a generational difference between the old and the young. The young feel that they are Chinese; the old feel that they are Hong Kongers.

THE USE OF VIOLENCE

The protest movement in Hong Kong has been committed to non-violence. There is, however, a minority of violent protesters. Their actions are not condoned. The airport, the MTR and vandalising private property must be condemned.

Such violent behaviour has brought discredit to the protest movement. It has also damaged the economy and Hong Kong’s reputation as a safe and efficient global city. Violence will beget violence and not concessions.

INvolvement of Outside Forces

Is the protest movement in Hong Kong being manipulated by the United States or Taiwan? I don’t have the answer.

But don’t think the US has the power to motivate one million to two million Hong Kongers to the mass demonstrations peacefully against the extradition Bill.

I think the protest movement is made in Hong Kong and not in Washington or Taipei.

CONCLUSION

I want the people of Hong Kong to know that they enjoy the goodwill of the people of Singapore.

We want the current crisis to be resolved peacefully. It is unreasonable for the protest movement to accept all the demands.

The one demand that I think is reasonable to the demands for an independent inquiry. I hope the Chief Executive will consider accepting this demand, which could break the current deadlock.

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