

Protest Movements and Political Changes in ‘Managed Democracies’: A Study of Umbrella Movement, 2014 in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT: The second decade of the 21st century can truly be called an era of protests and social movements. These movements emerged equally in both democratic and non-democratic states. Hong Kong, the semi-autonomous region of China was jolted by one such movement called the Umbrella Movement. Though the movement had long historical roots, perhaps the immediate reason for its emergence was the controversy surrounding the election to the office of the Chief Executive. Tens of thousands of people occupied the central parts of the city center for more than two months. Though people bore all kinds of hardships and troubles but could not achieve anything at the end. This paper is about the causes for the emergence and ultimate failure of the Umbrella Movement, launched in the year 2014 to preserve the autonomous status of Hong Kong.

KEYWORDS: Protest Moments, Political Changes, Social Moments, Managed Democracies, Umbrella Moment

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Introduction

For years, there has been an increased academic interest into studying why and how people get themselves organized into social movements (d'Anjou & Male, 1998). However, it has been quite recent that scientists and scholars have given serious attention to studying empirically why movements emerge while some movements bear results and others don't. This is due to a number of conceptual and methodological issues that have not allowed the various subfields of social movements to evolve and progress (Bidé, 2015). More importantly, what has puzzled the social scientists including political scientists and sociologists in the past was their inability to better understand these movements within particular theoretical traditions of analysis (Melucci, 1990). Moreover, as movements grew in scope and diversity over the years, one could observe that scholars not only stretched but at the same time also challenged the thematic capacities and borders of the existing theoretical frameworks, and thus scholars engaged in researching and understanding resistance movements started looking for alternate explanations.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the emergence of different forms of collective actions in both industrialized as well as traditional societies has stimulated innovative and proactive conceptualization of the conception of social movements (CALHOUN, 1993). For a greater part of the 19th century, literature and research work on protest movements were dominated primarily by ideological theatrical frameworks while

during the later part by theoretical models of rationality and organization (Johnston, Laraiia, & Gusfield, [1994](#)). Much of the scholarly debate and academic literature was to understand the process that guided the emergence of social movements by analyzing the social system in a particular context that gave way to a particular ideology. These scholars with Marxist orientation have stressed the class origins and interests of the movement formation and the ideological programs accompanying them (McNall, [1986](#)). But most importantly, what these scholars ignored was the organization and the process of organizing into a class association in the process of movement formation.

In a major paradigmatic shift, sometimes after late 1960s, scholars and political analysts started talking about the rise of 'New Social Movements' defined as collective actions that went beyond and worked outside the ideological and class-based problems by focusing more on issues like identity, climate change, gay rights and many other rather than narrow economic goals (CALHOUN, [1993](#)). These post-materialists have increased significantly in number in recent years and have put greater focus on noneconomic factors as reasons responsible for the emergence of protest movements (Zeilig & Seddon, [2002](#)). In other words, movements of the post-industrial and post-modern world don't emerge and rise on social and economic class systems but are about new issues, and constituencies and thus questioned the traditional division of protest movement politics into left and right and further expanded the definitional as well as subjective base and spectrum of social movements to include issues that were thought of outside the jurisdiction of political action.

Between late September and mid-December, 2014, the world was taken by surprise when the Umbrella Movement in the semi-autonomous region of China, Hong Kong placed once again in the headlines after its transfer from their colonial masters, the United Kingdom into the People's Republic of China in the year of 1997 (Cheng, [2016](#)). When China took control of Hong Kong, for the sake of effective control, the former awarded the latter the status of Special Administrative Region to be ruled and governed by the Basic Law which provided for maximum autonomy in its internal affairs. Only defense and foreign policy were allowed to be the sole mandate of the central government in Beijing. Beijing also made a commitment for the gradual progressive democratization of the SAR. However, despite these strong legal provisions and political commitments, the citizenry in Hong Kong was denied the right to universal suffrage against what had been committed earlier by Beijing. Moreover, the local people raised reservations over the nomination and election for the office of the Chief Executive (CE). In Hong Kong, the CE is the executive head who runs the affairs of the government and is elected by a committee in which Beijing enjoys a structural majority. Furthermore, CE is accountable to the Central Government based in Beijing for all its work and responsibilities (Gold & Veg, [2020](#)). However, the decision of the National People's Congress to announce the long-awaited reform package on 31st August 2014 which was extremely conservative in essence dashed all the hopes to the ground for the gradual democratization of Hong Kong and thus sparked the occupation that lasted for seventy nine days.

The spell of protests that broke out in late 2010 in Tunisia in the MENA region spread gradually to other parts of the globe, affecting some seventy countries, including Russia, 2011, to name a few, Turkey, in 2013, Ukraine, and Venezuela, in 2014. Interestingly, every protest participant was aggrieved in its own way, and for its own local reasons (Krastev, From Politics to Protest, [2014](#)). However what they had in common was that they turned into public spaces, 'the squares' where they massed and planned for the next day; sidelined

political parties, and distrusted mainstream media by switching over to social media as a means of communication and information transmission (Arce & Rice, [2019](#)). As these young protesters had lost trust in the state institutions, they were least interested in taking the affairs of the state into their own hands. In other words, these leaderless movements didn't rise in revolt against the government, but against the way they were being governed. What surprised these scholars was that these movements affected both democratic and non-democratic regimes alike.

The Umbrella Movement was a spectacular display of bottom-up activism against a top-down power structure in what is called a 'managed democracy' (Krastev & Holmes, *An Autopsy of Managed Democracy*, [2012](#)). Polls suggest that somewhat more than 1.4 million demonstrators turned up and participated in the protest demonstrations – a turn-out ratio that caused regime change in Ukraine (2004), Tunisia (2011), and Egypt (2011). Although 20 percent of the city population had actively participated in the movement, the existing literature unanimously agrees that the movement failed to exert pressure enough to force the government to agree to any of its demands. More specifically, the movement could neither bring any substantive policy changes nor bring any changes in the political institutions, which means that no governmental authority has been held accountable or forced to resign, nor any reform package has been tabled in the legislature (Ma & Cheng, [2019](#)).

The Problem at Hand

Social movements in the recent past have received increased academic attention in the first part of the ongoing century and one could see the acceleration of research publications on the subject matter (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, [2010](#)). The earlier scholarship led by liberal traditions, based on a rationalist-individualistic approach undermined the significance of collective actions and maintained that social movement had little influence on political changes in a country. Marco Giugni Paul Burstein and Sarah Sausner are the chief supporters of this perspective who maintain that it is elections and political parties, instead of social movements, that exert greater influence on political developments happening in a particular era. Some of the scholars in this group even opined that political changes are external to social movements and so, are rarely influential for political consequences (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, [2010](#)). These writers are of the opinion that structural changes in a particular country produce political changes that ultimately provide a fertile ground for the rise of resistance movements. This was one of the primary reasons for the late start on researching the subject area under study.

Moreover, progress in this subfield of political movements was hindered by yet another scholarly approach on the grounds of the success-failure dichotomy (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, [2010](#)). This group of thinkers denied out rightly the political outcomes of a protest movement on the pretext that if a movement realized its stated objectives, the movement was thought to be successful, the result of which was that scholars closed their eyes to the considerations of other possible political outcomes. On the other hand, there is a strong possibility that a movement may fail to achieve its objectives, but still results in substantial political outcomes. It is here where the problem lies, and scholars failed to give any attention to the political consequences of the protest movements.

Existing literature suggests that the nexus between protest movements and their political outcomes is hard to research for certain methodological and conceptual shortcomings (Earl, [2000](#)). In particular, it is very difficult to establish if a particular political development was the result of a social movement because there are multiple political actors working at a particular point in time. This is further challenged by the gap in time when a movement emerges and the subsequent political changes it produces. Moreover, if any work has been done, it has been done on the policy outcomes of a social movement.

The Rise and Emergence of the Umbrella Movement

In the year 1997 when the British government allowed the Chinese government to take control of Hong Kong, the latter was allowed to retain its autonomy to a certain extent. However, the Chinese government slowly and gradually started its reform process to curtail and minimize its independence and autonomy under the philosophy of one country, and two systems. In the first decade of the handover, there started movements and campaigns in Hong Kong for certain electoral reforms to the office of the CE and to preserve its autonomy. Beijing joined hands with the political leadership, business elites, and corporate and real estate tycoons to engineer and develop a strong network of patronage to better serve the Chinese interests there. The reason for this long-term honeymoon is the shared economic and financial benefits that these corporate giants share with the Chinese government which has started embracing global capitalism and economic development. What the Chinese government wants is to maintain the status quo and discourage radical reforms while these pro-establishment communities have won benefits in the shape of financial and economic opportunities for their unconditional support.

Hong Kong which is governed under the Basic Law provides that there should be a Chief Executive who is to be elected in free and fair elections through adult suffrage. What the Hong Kongers believe is that this would ensure their autonomous status and independence in their internal affairs. However, tension started erupting when the people in Hong Kong felt that China was eroding their autonomy by scrutinizing and screening the candidates for the office of the executive head of the region (Chan, [2014](#)). Anyone whose patriotism could be doubtful was denied the opportunity to run for the office of the Chief Executive. This gave way to mass street protests and political tension in Hong Kong.

Article 45 of the Basic Law provides for election to the office of the CE through adult suffrage from nominees suggested by a representative nomination committee in a democratic process. However, as the consultation process began in May 2013, the government in the capital city of Beijing made a clarification that anyone nominated for the slot of CE must be a patriot and that nomination can only be made by the nomination committee notified by the central government (Ortmann, [2015](#)). As people's sentiments had already been hurt by the decision made earlier in regard to direct elections, the recent development proved to be the last nail in the coffin.

The movement for democratic reforms started in the month of September, 2014. The protesters occupied the main city centers for months to press the government for their demands. Initially, the government responded with tear gases to disperse the people. In order to defend themselves from the tear gases, the protesters responded by using umbrellas, and so the movement was named after that. The occupation continued for more than three months when the protesters started dispersing. Major roads in the city that

had been occupied and blocked by the protesters were opened for traffic, university students went back to their classrooms empty-handed by not securing what they had gathered for. They felt exhausted and hopeless.

When the protest began, more than 1,00,000 people had come out to press the government for reforms. The world media talked of it extensively and dubbed it as Umbrella Revolution. The protesters bore almost all sorts of state brutality for months and remained steadfast but tragically, ended up nowhere. The big question is why it failed. Why could it not achieve what it had been launched for? These are questions that need to be analyzed in detail.

Perhaps, the most important reason for the movement's failure was the lack of unified and united leadership. There was hardly any identifiable and recognizable leader that we can say led the movement. For any movement to succeed, it is important that there should be a designated leadership that would lead from the front, organize the participants, and provide direction to the movement. In the absence of any such thing, confusion reigns supreme and the movement becomes more vulnerable to failure. For the government, it is too easy to quell any such movement. Though there were certain university professors at the forefront of the movement, given the nature of their profession and political training, they didn't have the capacity to organize the protest smartly and negotiate effectively with the government.

The other factor that contributed to the movement's failure was the strength and capacity of the government in Beijing. The government in China, no doubt, is strong enough and has all the resources to deal with any disturbance effectively. Given their institutional structure and political culture, they can unleash force to contain any disturbance and resistance and they did.

Conclusion

The movement was the first of its kind in Hong Kong that emerged to preserve the autonomous status of the region in 2014. Initially launched by university students and teachers, the movement attracted support from every segment of society and gained momentum as time went on. The protesters occupied the city center for more than two months. They were dedicated and energetic to achieve what they had come out for but in the end, could not achieve anything. The movement ended in total failure and people went back empty-handed. Perhaps the greatest reason for its failure was the lack of a single unified leadership to organize the protesters effectively and provide them a direction. The Chinese government came hard on the protesters and used hard tactics to disperse the protesting community. The government in Beijing had the last laugh and was able to quell the movement effectively.

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