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Hong Kong - a risky victory

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The ?silent majority' in Hong Kong, who regime supporters hoped would show that they are fed up with the pro-democracy protests that have shaken the city in the past five months, turns out to be not only silent but non-existent.

Going into the district council elections on Sunday, a majority of the councils were controlled by pro-Beijing parties. By the time almost three million votes were counted Sunday night, 17 out of 18 councils were in the hands of pro-democracy councillors. It was a great victory ? but Hong Kongers are still not going to get democracy.

The district councils don't make important decisions ? they mostly deal with things like bus schedules and garbage collection ? and for precisely that reason the Beijing regime lets them be genuinely democratic. This time, however, the council elections became a sort of referendum on whether Hong Kongers still support the protesters ? and they clearly do.

At the higher levels of the administration, where more important decisions get made, democracy is notable by its absence. The Chief Executive ? the head of the government ? is chosen by a committee of 1,200 members of whom fewer than one-tenth are elected by popular vote, and their choice must then be approved by the Communist regime in Beijing.

That is not going to change, because the Chinese government's highest priority is always to preserve the Communist monopoly of power, and it will not accept full democracy anywhere on its territory. Democracy in Hong Kong might set a dangerous example for people elsewhere in the vast country, so it cannot be allowed.

True, Hong Kong people enjoy rights that no other Chinese have, like freedom of speech and independent courts. This ?one country, two systems' arrangement is guaranteed for 50 years by the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1997, when Britain handed its Hong Kong colony back to China, but that did not include a commitment to unbridled democracy.

The ensuing Basic Law that acts as Hong Kong's constitution does say that the ?ultimate aim? is for the chief executive to be selected by universal suffrage, but any lawyer will tell you that an ultimate aim is something you can postpone forever.

A better guarantee is the fact that it is in the Beijing regime's interest to preserve the city as a place where foreign businesses are happy to set up because the rule of law prevails and the courts are independent. But it's still just a conditional guarantee, because Beijing's highest priority is not business. It is control.

The protesters have been remarkably determined and successful. They have already managed to force Chief Executive Carrie Lam to drop her proposed law that would have allowed Hong Kong residents to be extradited and tried in Chinese courts. That would have ended the rule of law in the city, since Chinese courts do whatever the regime wants.

It was not Lam's idea in the first place, and she probably warned Beijing that it was a bad idea, but she is not a free agent. As she said at a private business meeting several months ago, she has to serve two masters (Beijing and the people of Hong Kong), and her room for manoeuvring is ?very, very, very limited.?

She also said ?If I have a choice, the first thing is to quit, having made a deep apology,? but she does not have a choice in that. Neither does she have a choice in which concessions to make to the protesters, but Beijing has already let her drop the extradition law, and these striking election results might now convince it to let her go a little further.

If she were to grant two more of the protesters' demands ? an amnesty for all arrested protesters and an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality ? the protesters would be well advised to declare a victory and go home. And it would really be a victory, for the strength of their reaction should act as a deterrent to any push by Beijing for greater control over Hong Kong for years to come.

If they go on demanding free elections under universal suffrage for the Chief Executive and the Legislative Assembly, however, sooner or later Beijing will feel compelled to intervene and crush them regardless of the financial and reputational damage it would suffer.

Which way will it go? Impossible to say, but a major obstacle to a negotiated outcome is that the protesters have deliberately avoided having recognised leaders.

That's understandable, because any identifiable leaders would promptly be arrested. But it makes it very difficult for Lam to negotiate a deal, or for the students at the heart of the protests to guarantee that a deal would definitely end them.

So it could go the distance, and end in tragedy. That would be a great pity.