

Hong Kong: what went wrong?

by GWYNNE DYER

'We are the meat on the chopping board,' said Martin Lee, founder of Hong Kong's Democratic Party. 'They have set a precedent for Beijing to legislate on Hong Kong's behalf.' Or as Dennis Kwok put it, former member of the Legislative Council, put it rather more succinctly: 'This is the end of Hong Kong.'

It's a premature death. The 'joint declaration' of 1997 by which Britain handed over its wealthy colony on China's south coast to the Communist regime in Beijing promised that Hong Kong could keep free speech, the rule of law and a high degree of autonomy for 50 years. Twenty-three years later, it's over.

Those characteristics, so different from the Party dictatorship, contempt for human rights and disregard for the law that prevail in the rest of China, were precisely the qualities that enabled Hong Kong to become Asia's financial capital. That was to Beijing's advantage in 1997, so it agreed to live with 'one country, two systems'. China would be reunited, but Hong Kong would remain different.

That served China's purposes at the time, because it still needed a capitalist 'window on the world'. It's not very relevant today, when the country has the world's second-biggest economy and companies that want to trade with China are much likelier to set up in Shanghai or Beijing. Hong Kong retains a residual value for Beijing, but it shouldn't push its luck.

Most people in senior political, business and media positions in Hong Kong understood that and acted accordingly. They walked a tightrope, defending the territory's essentially 'democratic' values, but they never, ever suggested that Hong Kong should have full democracy, because that would be intolerable to the Party in Beijing.

So the modus vivendi between Beijing and Hong Kong rattled along year after year, until eventually a new leader came to power in Beijing who dreamed of standardising, centralising and controlling everything. Last year, Xi Jinping started trying to whip Hong Kong into line.

Beijing pressured Carrie Lam, Chief Executive of Hong Kong's government, to pass legislation that would let Beijing bring criminal charges against Hong Kongers, extradite them to China, and try them in Communist Party-controlled mainland courts (which have a 99% conviction rate). It would have ended Hong Kong's autonomy and put every one of its residents at the mercy of the Party.

Lam reluctantly put the new law on the legislative agenda, and the people of Hong Kong, led by the students, predictably began demonstrating against it. This is a ritual dance that has been staged before, and when the citizens had adequately expressed their dislike of the proposed legislation, it was withdrawn.

It was never certain that this would work again, for Xi is very determined and Hong Kong's importance to China has dwindled. But it might have worked, and won Hong Kong another five or ten years of autonomy. Indeed, Lam did withdraw the offending legislation (by slow steps, so as not to embarrass Beijing) but the protesters did not stop.

The demos continued and grew more violent, and the demands escalated. By the end of 2019 the protesters were demanding full democracy, which was politically suicidal in the Chinese context. Then the coronavirus emergency shut everything down for a few months, and it looked like the political crisis had subsided. But of course it had not.

This week the Chinese People's Congress in Beijing, the regime's rubber-stamp parliament, will pass a special law banning subversion, separatism, acts of foreign interference and 'terrorism' in Hong Kong. The demonstrators are already back out on the streets, and the new law allows 'security forces' from the mainland to operate in the city. The stage is being set for the final act.

I don't usually point out that I called things right (and I NEVER point out where I got things wrong), but it was blindingly obvious where this was all heading by mid-summer of last year.

On July 31, I wrote: "(The protesters) must never challenge the Communist regime's ultimate control, but from time to time they have to demonstrate to Beijing that tolerating a local aberration like civil rights in Hong Kong is less costly politically than ending it by force. They have done enough to achieve that for now, and it's probably time to stop."

On October 2, I wrote: "The protesters have won what they originally came out for: the withdrawal of the extradition law. Their other demands will never be granted, because they imperil the ultimate authority of the Communist Party. It's time to collect their winnings and step away from the table."

On November 24, I wrote: "If they go on demanding free elections under universal suffrage for the Chief Executive and the Legislative Assembly, sooner or later Beijing will feel compelled to intervene and crush them regardless of the financial and reputational damage it would suffer. So it could go the distance, and end in tragedy. That would be a great pity."

And then I stopped writing about it, because I couldn't stand what comes next. I still can't.