



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 6

Can democracy survive in Hong Kong?

Shalini Randeria, Host (SR)

Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, Professor of Social Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the IHEID, Excellence Chair at the University of Bremen

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, Guest (JPC)

Chair and Professor of Political Science at Hong Kong Baptist University

Published 1 July 2021

Democracy in Question? is the podcast series of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and the Excellence Chair, University of Bremen (Research Group: Soft Authoritarianism).

Podcast available on:

[Google Podcasts](#), [Apple Podcasts](#) and wherever you usually find your favorite podcasts.

SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question," the podcast series that explores the challenges democracies all around the world are facing today. I'm Shalini Randeria, the Director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

My guest today is Professor Jean-Pierre Cabestan. Jean-Pierre is the chair and professor of political science at Hong Kong Baptist University, where he heads government and international studies. He has written extensively about Chinese politics and its relationship with its neighbors, especially Taiwan. In 2019, he published "China Tomorrow: Democracy or Dictatorship?", a book that looks at the workings of the Chinese political system and the Chinese Communist Party. Last year, he also published "Hong Kong: the Second Handover" for the Fondation pour l'innovation politique. It looks at the implications of the new national security law which is central to the crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, the subject of my discussion with Jean-Pierre today. Thank you so much, Jean-Pierre, for joining me.

JPC: Good morning and thank you for your very kind invitation.

[00:01:30]

SR: So, tensions between Hong Kong and China have been building up since 1997 when the territory was transferred to China from the British Empire. The decade's long pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong is, I think, faced with its most severe crises today. In 2014, electoral reforms proposed by China sparked the so-called Umbrella Revolution, and we'll

1

talk about that, for the second time in a row, in 2020, and then again this year, 2021, the iconic Tiananmen Square commemorations have been banned in Hong Kong. And we're recording this episode the day after a raid on the pro-democracy newspaper, "Daily Apple," which is known to be critical of Mainland Chinese leadership. So today, we're going to delve into what is going on in Hong Kong at the moment and into its relationship with China.

[00:02:30] I think it's clear these are not isolated instances, they're indicative of a very large crackdown and a planned crackdown, which has intensified, especially since the imposition of the national security law on the 30th June 2020. The law allows the Chinese government to have full control over the city and its residents. It criminalizes any act of dissidence, in effect, ending freedom of expression for people in the city. Could you say something to begin with about the media landscape, Jean-Pierre, and the place of "Apple Daily," and what the current arrest of five of its editors means?

JPC: The media landscape, after the handover in 1997, remained, for some time, pretty open. But step by step, the Chinese Communist Party and the central government of China have tried to rein in this open media landscape and to gradually neutralize newspapers, so for them to stop openly criticizing the Communist Party. There's been some threats launched against well-known newspapers like the "Ming Pao," which is the mostly read newspaper in Hong Kong. Other newspapers which are more specialized in economic and financial issues like the "Sing Pao" or

the Economy Daily News has for a long time stopped criticizing the Communist Party.

[00:04:00] If you look at the English newspaper, the only English newspaper which has survived today, it is "South China Morning Post." And today, by and large, it has been also basically neutralized. So, the only dissenting voice today among the printed press remains the "Apple Daily" news. And there's been a plan, particularly since the enactment of the national security law a year ago, to get rid of this newspaper, to close it down. So, it started with the arrest of Jimmy Lai, the owner of the newspaper who is...he's now in jail. And all sorts of accusations for participating in illegal demonstrations, but there are other grievances, other accusations which will, unfortunately, keep him in jail for a long time. Now, as you said, yesterday, five editors of the "Apple Daily" news have been arrested. We see that again, step by step, the authorities are clipping the wings of this newspaper, and I sadly predict that before the end of the year, and even before the end of the summer maybe, the "Apple Daily" news printed version will be forced to stop. Now the question is whether it will be able to continue online. Planning the "Apple Daily" news online will mean that the Hong Kong authority will need to sort of start censoring the web, which for the time being, they refrain from doing it because that will clearly put an end to any degree of autonomy and freedom in Hong Kong, and align Hong Kong management of the web to the Chinese management of the web, which means that tools like Facebook, Twitter, Google will be banned. So we'll see how it

goes, but I think the printed version of the "Apple Daily" news is already more or less dead.

[00:05:45]

SR: Before I come to some of the background to these developments, I would like to ask you a personal question because you have been living in Hong Kong, teaching in Hong Kong for a very long time. So how has your own experience in the city changed over the course of your residence there? And particularly, how have changes in the recent years influenced the space in which you operate, which is the university, the space of academic freedom and how has it influenced student life?

JPC: I have to say that up to now, I haven't received any instructions to stop teaching on particular subject, and I teach on subject which are deemed to be sensitive in the eyes of the Chinese authorities because I teach on Chinese politics, contemporary Chinese politics, domestic politics, foreign policy. And I continue to teach on all the subjects which I need to cover in those courses including Tiananmen, including Ching Cheong, including human rights issues, including what happened during the Cultural Revolution, The Great Leap Forward, all these disasters, man-made disasters during the time of Mao.

[00:07:00] Now, it doesn't mean that things haven't changed in the academia since last year. I think there has been more self-censorship. I know a colleague who decided to stop teaching altogether on China because he's too worried about it. I have to say, you know, I'm close to retirement, so I feel fear, maybe the younger colleagues including

4

expatriates who want to stay in Hong Kong, they want to make their career here as an expatriate, non-Chinese, I feel probably fear that my colleagues, and particularly the ones who have family in Mainland China. Those are the ones with less freedom because the Chinese authorities have quite a big leverage on them. I see also more self-censorship among students, but not all of them. And I have to say that some of my student groups have remained pretty open. We've been able to debate about the issues. And what I keep telling my students is we are political scientists. We are not politicians. So we can analyze things, we can talk about things. So my line of conduct has been to carry on as before and to wait until people tell me I should stop doing things. And so far it hasn't happened.

[00:08:00]

SR: Your students are not only just Hong Kong residents, but a lot of your students probably come from Mainland China. So what does that mean for them to have a fresh breath of democracy here or until very recently, and then go back after their education at Hong Kong University, back to Mainland China?

JPC: Many of the students including from Mainland China who come to Hong Kong to study political science, they have, of course, the expectation that they will be able to study real political science. In China, you don't do political science, you do public administration, you do international relations from time to time, but you have, again, to be very cautious and to abide by party instructions. So I think there is still a

degree of freedom, academic freedom in Hong Kong we're trying to protect. Now, I can't predict that within 5 years or so, 10 years, things won't be changed, won't change, I can see the political environment changing. They're putting more pressure on the academia. But, you know, most of my students, I have to say are yellow, they're pro-democracy, if not pro-independence. And most of my colleagues are also yellow. And I think the authorities know it pretty well. They know that the academia is filled with people who are pro-democracy, and you're not going to change their minds because the national security law has been enacted. But they have to be more cautious, clearly.

[00:09:30]

SR: Now, let's go a step back, Jean-Pierre, and sketch for us the historical trajectory of Hong Kong that leads to the current really serious backlash. So, what exactly is its semiautonomous status and the principle of "one country two systems" that is supposed to govern its political system?

[00:10:00]

JPC: Yeah. I think we have to go back to the early 1980s and the beginning of the reform era, when Deng Xiaoping decided to reintegrate Hong Kong into the Chinese territory, the Chinese nation, but at the same time, it needed to keep Hong Kong the way it was because Mainland China needed Hong Kong finance, banking institutions, Hong Kong expertise in a number of areas including hotel management, including transportations, including managing, you know, big cities, and

6

so on. So he didn't want to rock the boat. Deng Xiaoping in 1983 imagined this formula, "one country two system." And that led to the Joint Declaration between the UK government and the Chinese government in 1984. And the Joint Declaration is a very important document because it lays the ground for the high degree of autonomy, for the fact that Hong Kong will keep its capitalist system. And that is very important because the distinction at the time was between capitalism in Hong Kong, socialism in China, and not democracy, and dictatorship, or democracy and one-party system, but also that the chief executive and Hong Kong institutions will be chosen by election or consultation. So actually, the ground was rather open about the form of selection of the chief executive, and the Legislative Council, or the Parliament of Hong Kong. That led another second step, the enactment by the Chinese government of the Basic Law. The Basic Law of the...let's say all the special administrative region of Hong Kong, which here indicate a number of very important principles including the election of the chief executive and the move of Hong Kong institutions to gradually to universal suffrage. So, the idea was to move step by step from a hybrid political system to a fully democratic political system. China, and that's the major criticism made by a lot of Hong Kong people, has not kept its promises of introducing universal suffrage and introducing full democracy in Hong Kong, and allowing Hong Kong people to choose their elected representatives. And that's where we are now with the enactment of the national security law and the revamping of the election system which was introduced or announced, if you want, in March of 2021.

[00:12:15]

SR: So, instead of China keeping to its promises on a trajectory towards political freedoms and democracy in Hong Kong, we are seeing a backlash. And it looks as if it's a really step-by-step planned backlash by the Chinese government stifling any movement for democracy. So, one thing I would like you to talk about is the iconic strength and resilience of the Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, most of them very young activists. Because they have had some victories like 2003, the mass protest were able to defeat the first enactment of the imposition of this repressive security bill. 2012, if I remember, the authorities tried to introduce Chinese patriotic lessons into the school curriculum and that was also met by huge protests and the authorities had to climb down. So, it's been sort of back and forth between the authorities and the activists.

[00:13:15]

JPC: Yeah, Shalini, that started in 2003, which was a major turning point in the "one country two systems" formula because as you indicated, at the time, the security bill was actually less repressive than the one we have today. But it was perceived by most Hong Kong people as being a step in the wrong direction, a step which would curtail Hong Kong freedoms and Hong Kong democracy. And that's why you had half a million people in the street. I was in Hong Kong at the time in June, July 2003. And the authorities had to compromise and to suspend the bill. But since then, the central government decided to be much more hands-on as far as Hong Kong was concerned and to put more pressure on Hong

Kong to narrow the gap with Mainland China. Now, there's been a change of generation, and that's very important to indicate here because in 2003, it was still...the movement opposing the national security law was led by the traditional Democratic Party. Later, starting as in 2012 when the Chinese authorities wanted to introduce patriotic education, a new generation of activists appeared in Hong Kong who felt that the pan-democrats had been too mild, too moderate, and couldn't get much from the Chinese authorities. And so new forms of activism emerged at the time, and with the new generation like Joshua Wong, you know, who was at the time still a teenager mobilized new segments of the society, and particularly the youth, to oppose the patriotic education in 2012 and later to launch or take control of the Umbrella Movement, which was another important landmark in the political history of Hong Kong; because the Umbrella Movement was launched by the pan-democrats in order to sort of compare or try to convince Beijing to abide by its promises and offer real universal suffrage for the election of the chief executive instead of selecting the candidates and having a very narrow election of the chief executive as was proposed by the central government in 2014. But the movement itself was very quickly taken over by the young activists.

[00:15:30]

SR: Would that explain some of the radicalization of the demands which have taken place, which are now not only demands for democracy but also complete independence from China?

JPC: Well, first of all, I have to say that the pro-independence people in Hong Kong have always been a very small minority of people. Because if you look at...the best indicator was the 2016 election of the Legislative Council, parliamentary election, where you had maybe 18% of the voters voted for what we called at the time localist candidates. But among the localists, what we call [speaks Chinese] in Chinese, only a fraction of them were pushing for independence, and maybe one-third of them, so it means 6% of the voters and candidates were in favor of Hong Kong independence. It was not supported by the rest of the electorates and all the rest of the political lead because it was clearly, not only impossible but inconceivable for most people. And also among the pan-democrats, some had some suspicion about the pro-independence people, whether they were manipulated by the Chinese authorities in order to help the central government delegitimize the whole pan-democratic camp. And that's exactly what was happening. If you look at all the decisions since the enactment of the national security law, clearly, initially, their target were the pro-independence people, but the real targets were the pan-democrats. So, the excuse was to neutralize the pro-independent people, but actually, the target was much bigger, much wider than that.

[00:17:15]

SR: Why the nervousness of the Chinese Communist Party about this little, tiny island city of Hong Kong? So is there major fear that if you don't repress democracy fully in Hong Kong, it will lead to demands for democratic reforms on Mainland China?

JPC: I think the basic answer is that they worry. They worry that, and fear to see Hong Kong becoming a base for subversion. And preventing Hong Kong from becoming a base of subversion and able to subvert or contributing to subverting the one-party system in China has always been a bottom line, a redline, if you want, for the Chinese Communist Party. Hong Kong, because it's open society, it includes a lot of NGOs, you have all these activists, people commemorating Tiananmen, the crackdown, but also you have a lot of religious organizations active in Mainland China. And they will signal that in the last few years, the Chinese authorities and Xi Jinping government were more and more uneasy with these forms of criticism or activism which were still developing in Hong Kong.

[00:18:30] So they started with the...a few years ago in 2015 also, by the arrest and kidnapping of some book publishers, people who were publishing books criticizing Xi Jinping, criticizing the privileges of the Chinese Communist Party, elite in China, and writing seditious stories about their leaders' sex lives, and so on. You know, actually, those books were aimed at making money. But they were smuggled into China and the Chinese authority wanted to put an end to that. And that started in 2015. Now, what they were worried about is to see those ideas having more influence in China itself, in Mainland China. And that's why the crackdown started. And now, what they want to, is to prevent Hong Kong from becoming a base for subversion all the way from any kind of political activism to religious influence and other forms of influence in China.

[00:19:15]

SR: Is this nervousness, this fear that there could be a democratic upsurge on Mainland China, is it not a rather far-fetched fear? Because actually, it seems to be, at least for someone like me, watching from the outside, that the Chinese citizens seem to be fairly content to live in a controlled, but well-functioning capitalist system which is providing prosperity, and there doesn't seem to be any more really strong clamor for democratic rights for freedom of expression on Mainland China.

[00:20:00]

JPC: You're right. If we look at the opinion polls, with the one which can be conducted in China, a lot of Chinese are quite happy with the current political system, or at least they don't challenge it. They're not trying to change it. And I think that's very much a mainstream view in Mainland China. That's why they don't have any tolerance towards what's happening in Hong Kong or what's happening in Xinjiang. They don't care about, you know, the Uyghur and the way they control or repress. And most people are just interested in their own daily life, prosperity, and security, security of goods, security of family, and the stability of the society. So, I think we can say that there is a lack of democratic culture in China itself. At the same time, as we know, and that's where things get complicated, among the elites and liberal elites, it's very hard for them to survive because of the growing repression of any kind of dissenting ideas in China.

[00:21:00] So, ever since Xi Jinping came into power in 2012, you've seen more activists being arrested, the heirs of the Liu Xiaobo, you know, Charter 08 Movement, people like Xu Zhiyong, Pu Zhiqiang, and so on, they have all been jailed because they wanted to push for a more constitutional system, a system in which the party will be under the constitution. And those people have been arrested. Likewise, there's been a big crackdown of activists and lawyers in 2015, with arrests of more than 200 human rights lawyers. So the environment has become more much more repressive. So it's very hard to tell whether, you know, among the elites, at least, there is full support for Xi Jinping. I think Xi Jinping and the current highly repressive regime has also triggered a lot of resentment in the position, at least among the elites. But what you said about the mainstream view within the Mainland Chinese society remains, I think, very true. And there is, for the time being, no appetite for political change or putting pressure on the party to move towards another political system.

SR: Do you think Hong Kong business, banks, the financial sector will push back against the designs of the Chinese Communist Party? Is that likely to be a focus? How do you see, sort of in the near future, the pro-democracy forces emerging and mobilizing?

[00:22:30]

JPC: I think, by and large, the business community has been pretty happy, I mean, I'm talking about the local business community in Hong Kong, has been pretty happy with the national security law and the end

of social unrest. I'm not saying there are no yellow people among business people in Hong Kong, but still, the reason they are in favor of the communist is because their vested interests are in China. And the Hong Kong financial industry, banking industry, and so on, they are tied up with China. And the trend is going in that direction, which is to integrate the Hong Kong financial industry in the Chinese economy. And the new system of patronage and giving more representation to the various segments of the economy, and all the pro-Beijing social organization, chambers of commerce, and economic associations is going to give them some representation in the new system, which is going to be based on patronage more than democracy. So they're quite happy with the new system in a way. There will be some battle, of course, because there will be some competition to get elected to the seats newly open for them, in the parliament in the election committee, and so on.

[00:23:45] And if you look at the international business community, they, maybe, have stopped investing in Hong Kong, but they did not leave the Hong Kong. I mean, they tend to be more cautious. Some of them have moved part of their business to Singapore, or Japan, or other nations in Asia. But Hong Kong remains a place where it's important to be if they want to trade or to do business with China because Hong Kong still enjoy...and that holds also the interest of Beijing is to keep Hong Kong a free economic hub and financial hub with the free flow of capital, with all the economic freedoms which you have in a free economy and you don't have in China. Because in China, capital control is very, very tight. That's the kind of complementary role Hong Kong will continue to

play in the Chinese economy. And I think here, there is a consensus in Beijing, as far as I can see, to keep all those freedoms in Hong Kong. So, to put it simply, Hong Kong's political freedom has been clearly cut and restricted, but economic freedom will...is here to stay.

[00:24:45]

SR: So, let me end with a final question on the response of the international community, which has shown insufficient support in a way, or not a very strong support and solidarity with the people of Hong Kong. And the sanctions which have been imposed, are they likely to have, the sanctions against China, which the U.S. imposed, for example, and the EU also, are they likely to have any kind of impact towards supporting democratic forces? And interestingly for me, at the G7 summit, the world's wealthiest democracies have been largely silent on the Hong Kong issue. So, could the EU and the U.S. be doing something different, or is it really that their hands are tied because of their economic interests?

[00:25:30]

JPC: I will start by saying that we cannot say that there has not been any concern for what's happening in Hong Kong. I think there has been a lot of concern in Europe, in the UK, of course, and in America and elsewhere, in every free society including Japan, Taiwan, Korea. So there's been a lot of concern, but I would add immediately to that, there's been a lack of leverage on what can be done. Because all the sanctions which have been taken by the U.S., for instance, are pretty

15

symbolic for a very simple reason is that the U.S. administration, including the Trump administration didn't want to shoot itself in its foot because it didn't want to affect the interest of the American companies based in Hong Kong. I mean, one very extreme decision which could've been taken is to stop recognizing the peg, you know, the fixed exchange rate between the Hong Kong dollar and the American dollar. But that would have had destabilizing impact on Hong Kong as a whole, but also on American companies and all the, you know, foreign companies doing business in Hong Kong. So, I think that the Trump administration didn't want to see that happening. So that's why the sanctions were pretty symbolic. And that's why the EU as well couldn't do more than offering maybe, and that's the case of the UK, of offering more opportunities for Hong Kong people who want to move out of Hong Kong to settle down in the UK or in other countries in Europe. So that's the current situation. And, you know, Hong Kong has been under the control of the Communist Party since 1997. The Communist Party decided to now tighten its control over Hong Kong, and there is not much we can do. In Hong Kong, the Communist Party has always been in a very strong position. And the reason, I think, Xi Jinping decided to go ahead and speed up the integration of Hong Kong in China has to do with Mainland China's political system and the new Cold War, I think I would say between the China and the West, the fact that China is in a battle against Western democracies, against liberal ideas. And its battle is a global battle. So it doesn't want to see Hong Kong feeding the enemy's camp in that battle and helping the enemy's camp in that battle. It wants to see Hong Kong

on its side. And that's why they needed to neutralize Hong Kong, and to force Hong Kong to toe the line, and to put an end to political freedom.

[00:28:00]

SR: So, thank you very, very much, Jean-Pierre, for these fascinating insights into the larger background both of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, but also for putting the Hong Kong case within the larger global politics. So thank you very much.

JPC: Thank you, and goodbye.

SR: The relentless and concerted assault by the Chinese government on democratic rights, the free press, and freedom of expression in Hong Kong continues unabated. The space for civil society activism, and especially for pro-democracy movements, which has shown remarkable strength and resilience in Hong Kong is rapidly shrinking. Western governments have imposed some sanctions recently against the Chinese, but these are more symbolic than effective in reversing the trend. Given the strong economic dependence of the American and European economies on the Chinese market and Chinese supply chains, the West has neither strong leverage nor is it likely to exercise it.

This concludes our episode of "Democracy in Question" today. Thank you very much for listening.