



## **Katedra mezinárodních vztahů a evropských studií**

**Fakulta sociálních studií  
MASARYKOVA UNIVERZITA**

**Brno, Joštova 10, 602 00, Česká republika**  
telefon: 00 420 - 549 497 175, fax: 00 420 - 549 491 920

# **Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong**

Essay to Causes of Political Violence (MVZ489)

Written by: **Andrea Bittnerová** (UČO 397711)

Lecturer: **Mgr. Zinaida Bechná, Ph.D.**

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of civil disobedience or resistance has been recently getting more and more academic attention. Violent moves allegedly remain the most effective tool to solve conflicts according to many but nonviolence is a rising solution and more and more frequent tool. As a case study for this paper, Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong was chosen. The reason is its contemporary nature and particularity. What makes this case so interesting is the nature of the political system of Hong Kong and its relationship with mainland China. Since the administrative region rules under the condition “One country, two systems”, any Chinese involvement cannot be seen as a foreign intervention and thus this case fits in the intrastate conflict analysis. Moreover, the very slogan makes it unique across the cases of civil disobedience. The origin of the movement was both in frustrations and hopes towards the democratic development of the region (Lam 2015, 101) and its size and scope are unprecedented in the city’s history (Bertolini 2015, 3). The name Umbrella Movement came from yellow umbrellas which protesters used to protect themselves from pepper spray used by the police (Chan 2015, 382-383).

Chenoweth (2014, 351) defines civil resistance as “a method of conflict where unarmed civilians use a variety of coordinated methods – strikes, protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and many other tactics – to prosecute the conflict without directly harming (or threatening to harm) an opponent.” It is also recommended to read definitions by International Center on Nonviolent Conflict and John Rawls (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Due to the extent of this paper, the concept of the civil disobedience as such will not be deeply analysed, thus further research into the topic, including *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2008) by Stephan and Chenoweth can only be encouraged.

For the purpose of this paper, we will be testing two theories. The first is by Stephan and Chenoweth – “Resistance campaigns that compel loyalty shifts among security forces and civilian bureaucrats are likely to succeed.” The second is more broadly defined and it is one of the twelve principles that Ackerman and Kruegler (1994) mention, namely the principle number 2 - “The group must develop organizational strength at each level of the organization: in the leadership, the operational corps, and the general population. In order to successfully employ nonviolent strategies the group must be able to hide members and resources, to disperse resources, and to surprise the opponent. They will need to make decisions under pressure. They must be able to garner support, and implement their decisions” (Glaser).

This paper will consist of the analysis of the movement including the background, main actors and actions taken. In conclusion, the theories chosen at the beginning will be tested to see whether they are valid or not for this case or what they got right and what wrong. It will not test why the conflict occurred as this is quite straightforward and, since due to the nature of the conflict, research rather explores whether the nonviolent movement was successful or not.

## **Background of the movement**

The Basic Law sets out that after three terms there is a possibility for a universal suffrage system if the overall situation demands a change. Thus, the first change could have come in 2005. The central government in Beijing, however, did not see a need for change then despite ongoing pro-democratic campaigns seeking full direct elections for Legislative Council and Chief Executive (CE) (Chan 2014, 572) and thus the first potential universal suffrage was proposed for 2017 (Kan 2013, 73).

The universal suffrage of the CE election is the “ultimate aim” as stated in the Basic Law of Hong Kong. However, the selection method “shall be specified in light of the actual situation and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress.” The candidate will be nominated by “broadly representative” committee. After the 2017 election have taken place, “all members of Legislative Council would be elected by universal suffrage as well” (ibid, 73-74). The CE must love the country and Hong Kong. Two or three candidates are chosen by the nominating committee who are then upon vote in universal suffrage. The winner will have to be appointed by the Central People’s Government of China (Lam 2015, 107).

Hui and Lau (2015, 350) see the origin of the movement in “polarization process and social structure that open the door for the onslaught of finance and real estate capital at the expense of low income groups, local resources, culture and history, thus triggering discontent and anger brewed by social injustice and inequality.” According to Kurata (2015, 19) the pro-democracy camp would be in minority and made impossible to advance their candidate.

## **Actions of civil disobedience**

Firstly, it needs to be mentioned that the Umbrella Movement evolved from an initial movement called Occupy Central (With Love and Peace) born with a law professor Benny Tai

(Kan 2013, 73). This was a movement of civil disobedience, peaceful movement and last resort (Chan 2014, 574) and it lasted from January 2013 until December 2014. Its focus was on “absolute non-violence” and participants should also be willing to bear any legal responsibility for their actions (Kan 2013, 73). Participants had to be very cautious about illegal activities and thus the movement operated with workshops (Ortmann 2015, 42), three deliberation days and road blockade was meant to be the last resort (Lam 2015, 105-106).

Following the original Occupy Central action, the central government released a White Paper on Hong Kong in May 2014. It did not bring anything new. It said that “China exercises sovereignty over Hong Kong while allowing it to continue to practice its own political, economic, and social systems for another forty years until 2047.” The autonomy is thus a subject to Chinese authorization (Lam 2015, 116). Nevertheless, it did not aim at introducing important content but rather to send a message.

Nonetheless, at the end of September, events took a different direction, one that the original organizers did not imagine so. The initial plan was a few days of protests and voluntary arrest and subsequently a return to normal life (Hui and Lau 2015, 348). Students, both secondary school and university, started to boycott classes and demonstrated outside government buildings (Chan 2014, 576). They even rallied to Government House at Admiralty (Lam 2015, 108). The police tried to stop them and prevent other people from joining but this only led to more supporters (Chan 2014, 576). The police used pepper spray and arrested dozens of students. This was the start of the proper civil disobedience campaign (Lam 2015, 108).

Later on, protesters took the streets and occupied key traffic areas in the financial district and also two main shopping districts Causeway Bay and Mong Kok (Bertolini 2015, 3). The leadership of the government offices and financial centres in Admiralty was held by two student organizations – the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism. Tents were set up in the other two districts (Hui and Lau 2015, 349).

Surprisingly, Umbrella Movement lasted for eleven weeks. Chan Kin-man, one of the organizers, explained that “a genuine universal suffrage in the CE election was needed to make the government respond to the demands of the people, to monitor the abuse of power of government, to break the monopoly of financial giants and to create a more equal society. It was pointed out that a CE elected by a genuine universal suffrage could also gain its support from people in the society and political parties in the legislature” (Lam 2015, 104).

At the end of November, Mongok was cleared by the police and students undertook a siege on government offices which resulted in clashes. Many feared this violence was

threatening to the whole concept of the movement and especially pan-democratic politicians started to distance themselves from the students. Hunger strike was not met with sympathy. Extreme anti-China groups accused them of not being radical enough. In December, a traditional sit-in protest was organized and participants let themselves to be removed and arrested by the police without any violent moves themselves. 247 people were arrested and 909 marked as illegally staying in the premises. The last area – Causeway Bay – was cleared December 15 (Hui and Lau 2015, 349).

Although this movement was an act of nonviolence, unfortunately this was not the case throughout the period that it lasted for when it came to those who disagreed with it. The students

occupied the main roads, they called for the resignation of the CE and that is when the random tear gas attacks took place. Following this, more people endorsed the students and occupation of roads was joined by occupying shopping districts. The government, in reverse, denied the civic nomination, as it was not in compliance with the Basic Law, nevertheless the police did not make any violent steps towards the protesters and did not clear them out of streets. However, as the blockage of main roads went on, it caused inconvenience among many people who were directly affected by this (Chan 2014, 576). Violent confrontations occurred a handful of times, and each time involving very few people, during more than two and a half months of occupation (Bertolini 2015, 4) despite using 87 cans of tear gas, countless pepper sprays, batons and the riot squad (Chow 2015, 472).

Hui and Lau (2015, 353) remark that differences among the population are major concerning all significant areas such as political positioning, orientation and vision, and strategic or tactical moves. The most extreme wing is the one advocating for independent Hong Kong. One of the striking and basic issues might be that the majority of the population does not want the next CE to be on bad terms with the central government even if he was coming from the pro-democracy camp. What is more, even if there could be an opinion shift on this, convincing people from mainland China and the central government would be another obstacle (Kurata 2015, 16).

The Hong Kong government dealt with the protests of autumn 2014 two ways. It did not intervene but at the same time it did not concede. Their aim was to wait until the movement and public would eventually tire off. After seeing that even after two months, the protests were not over, then it sent the police to clear out the streets which did not object much and it met with the public support thanks to releasing the areas from disruptions. The government actually agreed with taking part in a TV debate with student organizations in

October 2014 (Bertolini 2015, 3). They voiced these four demands: “withdrawal of the NPCSC decision in August 2014; endorsing civic nomination for the election of CE; abolition of functional constituencies; and a clear timetable to achieve these objectives. They no longer demanded the resignation of the CE. The government responses such as submitting a report to the central government setting out the public sentiment or continuing the dialogue seemed vague and non-committing, and thus the students decided to stay in the occupied areas (Chan 2014, 577).

The movement dissolved to many different forms; some returned to their ordinary lives, some continued with “occupying” but at the same time not disrupting the main roads, some followed an educational path, some joined separatist-populist groups targeting immigrants from the mainland China. Thus, this movement is not unified anymore, the objectives sometimes differ a lot, the only topic that remotely seems to be connecting them is dissatisfaction with both governments and a very vague idea of some kind of universal suffrage (Hui and Lau 2015, 349).

## **Conclusion**

The two chosen theories were selected intentionally due to the nature of the case and at the same time they are not completely unrelated. If a group of civil disobedience does not have strong leadership and overwhelming support among different classes of the population then it is almost impossible to shift opinions of security forces or civilian bureaucrats who have some kind of influence over the government since it leans on it. As it is very fragile to secure an outcome to nonviolent campaigns, both theories talk about likelihood of success.

Regarding the first theory, security forces and civilian bureaucrats are indeed essential components in this case. Security forces were the ones to clear people out of streets and use pepper sprays or tear gas. Although any violent move triggered more support for the movement, it was not enough to bring these forces not to attack or change their opinions just by protesting. In addition, civilian bureaucrats might be considered as the middle-class that the initial Occupy Central movement was targeting, nonetheless, this was not the most successful approach and the movement was taken over by the initially neglected ones – working class and mainly young. The middle-class is quite well-off, thus does not see any incentive to go for the movement and disrupt their state. Despite Hong Kong being a modern developed community, the two groups still matter in this case since all the major political

decisions have to be approved by the central government in Beijing. The support from these groups was not gained and the campaign did not reach success; this theory helps explain it.

Concerning the second theory, this one is more complex as it entails much more concepts. Overall organization strength is definitely essential and that is something the movement has not been able to meet. The initial Occupy Central had various workshops and deliberation days planned - it had a clear vision and clear end-point. It managed to gather a lot of supporters. Yet, when the students sparked the Umbrella Movement, despite gaining lots of supporters due to actions undertaken by the police, the society got really divided. There were different groups within wanting different things, a lot of citizens were bothered by the occupations disrupting a daily course. The question might be whether it could have been different if the students' protests never reached that kind of level, yet the rich and powerful would not agree anyway since the current state maintains their status quo. This is also connected with "garner support and implement their decisions."

As for the members and resources, this gets quite tricky. The participants embarked on the protests knowing they might be eventually arrested and they did not hide who they were and what they represented. A major part was consisted of students who are used to the pro-Western sort of life and who believe in democratic values. Thus, there was actually no point in hiding their members and the only difference might be fewer arrested people who would not have an impact on the overall outcome anyway. It is disputable what can be meant by resources here, so this will be omitted.

Lastly, the final straws into success are surprising the opponent and making decisions under pressure. The Umbrella Movement definitely came as a surprise – its beginning, its length, its scope. However, it met with protection from the security forces and lots of disagreement from the citizens. The movement undoubtedly gained a lot of attention, even international coverage, so the message is out there, but it did not help them to get their tangible goals. Under these circumstances, when facing the police for instance, they needed to act under pressure to figure out their next move. Nonetheless, elaborated moves by Occupy Central were causing much less trouble and the element of surprise or pressure was not that relevant for their results. On the other hand, it got much less attention at the same time, especially from the foreign media. Anyway, the foreign influence is not something to be taken into consideration here as this matter falls right under Beijing influence and the international community thus does not see the need to intervene as with other more urging topics with this Asian giant.

Headley and Tanigawa Lau (2016) blame the failure of the movement on the economy. Compared to mainland China, protests in Hong Kong might be less frequent but the bigger they are when it comes to their representation. Protests in 2003 provoked millions of dollars worth of damages and thus the government agreed to some democratic concessions. Hong Kong's Stock Exchange is one of the largest in Asia and therefore represents a vital importance to China. Hong Kong stock market outperformed others, the drop was quite slight and the economic disruption which had been predicted by many based on protest numbers and media coverage did not occur. Retail sales and tourism were even higher. After some issues with Shanghai market, Hong Kong showed to be extremely valuable and Beijing would not dare lose such important source of money. The government's ability to control the economy has to be shaken to change things. According to Laum (2015, 99-100), Hong Kong government appears to be a winner in this case due to ending mass protests, arresting main initiators and maintaining the political state.



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