

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Resisting autocratization: the protest–repression nexus in Hong Kong’s Anti-ELAB Movement

Hans H. Tung<sup>1,2\*</sup>  and Yuko Kasuya<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, <sup>2</sup>Center for Research in Econometric Theory and Applications, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan and <sup>3</sup>Department of Political Science, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [hanstung@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:hanstung@ntu.edu.tw)

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## Abstract

This introductory essay outlines the core themes of the special issue on the rise and fall of Hong Kong’s Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. In the essay, we highlight several theoretical and empirical contributions the featured papers make to our understanding of the protest–repression nexus from the onset of the movement to the imposition of the National Security Law. First, we describe the political and social contexts of the movement. Second, we present our empirical findings on Hong Kongers’ political preferences. Finally, we highlight new research avenues arising from this special issue.

**Keywords:** Anti-ELAB Movement; autocratization; comparative authoritarianism; Hong Kong; protest-repression nexus

## 1. Introduction

This special issue collects six research articles on political and social aspects of Hong Kong’s recent Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement spanning between June 2019 and June 2020. During the second half of 2019, we witnessed 6 months of protests triggered by a controversial bill introduced in February 2019 by the Hong Kong government. The bill legally allows its Chief Executive to transfer fugitives on a case-by-case basis to any jurisdiction, even those without formal extradition arrangements with Hong Kong, including mainland China. Given the huge discrepancies in judicial systems between Hong Kong and mainland China, Hong Kongers widely believed that the bill, once enacted, would open a door for dissidents to be extradited to Chinese courts for trials based on political reasons. The first direct confrontation between protesters and the police force outside of the government headquarters on 12 June soon set off a series of protests. The movement gradually became more violent as protesters expanded their repertoire of contention to include the use of Molotov cocktails, slingshots, vandalism, and vigilantism. Moreover, although the movement was intentionally kept decentralized in its organization, protest leaders still managed to make a coordinated effort to propose the ‘Five Demands’<sup>1</sup> as the shared objectives among all participants.

After several ineffective attempts by the Hong Kong government to calm the situation, the movement suddenly lost momentum due to the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020. It then ground to a halt

<sup>1</sup>They include:

- (1) Full withdrawal of the extradition bill.
- (2) A commission of inquiry into alleged police brutality.
- (3) Retracting the classification of protesters as ‘rioters.’
- (4) Amnesty for arrested protesters.
- (5) Dual universal suffrage, meaning for both the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive.

when Beijing passed the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020 to raise the political and legal costs for protest mobilization to such a high degree that no major protest attempt has been made since. While the entire contentious episode has almost come to a full stop as of the writing of this introductory essay, it leaves many interesting theoretical and empirical puzzles.

Since the handover in 1997, Hong Kong has become China's special administrative region and been governed under an ad-hoc framework of 'One Country, Two Systems' (OCTS henceforth). Under the basic law, the framework has created a *hybrid regime* in Hong Kong, where new authoritarian institutions, such as the Legislative Council, and indirect elections for the Chief Executive have been adopted; and several British legacies, such as the rule of law and judicial independence, coexisted. Absent any meaningful checks and balances in this design, before the Anti-ELAB Movement arose in June 2019, Beijing had already attempted several times to autocratize Hong Kong's semi-democratic institutions (Fong, 2020). The cohabitation of the 'two systems' was sustained largely through the ability of Hong Kongers' to organize massive demonstrations. Moreover, the entire repertoire of contention didn't take place in a political vacuum. The effect of protesters' strategies can be fully understood only in the context of Hong Kong's existing political institutions.

## 2. Organizing resistance: the political and social foundations of the Anti-ELAB Movement

### 2.1 *The political psychology of anti-autocratization resistance*

There are several distinct features of the Anti-ELAB Movement compared to previous protests in Hong Kong, and this special issue examines them through political psychology perspectives. First, compared to the Umbrella Movement in late 2014, the Anti-ELAB Movement avoided centralized leadership in order to maintain flexibility and elude state monitoring and crackdowns. How could participants sustain the momentum for collective action in such a decentralized setting? Second, the Anti-ELAB Movement was far more radical and violent than the Umbrella Movement. While they were not part of the 'Five Demands,' radical slogans calling for Hong Kong's independence were indeed heard much more often this time. Moreover, participants were more openly militant than their predecessors. Vandalizing pro-government shops and restaurants (the so-called 'blue ribbon') was basically unwitnessed 5 years ago. It makes one wonder how and why the Anti-ELAB Movement deviated from the previous peaceful tradition and turned so violent.

Building on the collective identity approach in the social movement studies (Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015), Yuen and Tong's (2021) paper in this special issue introduce the concept of 'intermediate collective identity,' which helped protesters develop solidarity in diversity. Concerning the radicalization of the movement, Tang and Cheng's (2021) paper in this special issue draws upon the recent emotional turn in the social movement studies (Kim, 2002; Jasper, 2011; Kleres and Wettergren, 2017) and identifies the social basis for 'Mutual Destruction' (Laam Caau) as a strategy for protesters by analyzing the two onsite protest surveys they conducted in December 2019 and January 2020. In particular, they focus on the movement's older participants, who are traditionally more conservative, and argue their guilt is the main driver of their support for the radicalization. In addition to their empirical efforts, both papers help us understand the psychological factors of protest mobilization beyond the rationalist paradigm.

### 2.2 *When protesters meet voters: the effects of authoritarian elections on protest mobilization*

In addition to the psychological factors such as emotion and collective identity discussed above, the Anti-ELAB Movement also provides an exceptional opportunity for empirical investigations into the role played by authoritarian elections in protest mobilization. The existing comparative authoritarianism literature tends to be particularly regime-centric for focusing on authoritarian elections' stabilizing effects. As Brancati (2014) and Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009) nicely summarize, despite being heavily manipulated, elections held under dictatorships not only allow their leaders to collect more information about the potential opposition, but also make the co-optation of their allies more credible.

In contrast, based on the more society-centric side of the literature (Chen and Moss, 2019), Shum's (2021) analysis of this special issue identifies a new kind of short-term strategy Hong Kong protesters adopted to mobilize support for their cause. Specifically, the paper conducts a comparative case study of the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement to show the conditions under which the actions on the street can work in tandem with the electoral politics to shape Hong Kong's political landscape. Relatedly, Tung *et al.* (2021), in another contribution in this special issue, find that Hong Kongers' institutional trust in election-related agencies was relatively higher than the executive counterparts and not affected even among pro-democracy people after the shock of the NSL. Such a level of trust also partially explains why the Anti-ELAB Movement protesters were able and willing to use Hong Kong's authoritarian elections as a mobilization tool.

### 3. When the axe falls: the political and social effects of National Security Law

The entire contentious episode brought about by the Anti-ELAB Movement ended abruptly when, to almost everyone's surprise, the NSL draft was added to the official agenda of the National People's Congress in late May 2020 and quickly passed in June of the same year. Instead of a Tiananmen-style crackdown some expected, Beijing adopted a softer approach of repression by directly outlawing most forms of protest in Hong Kongers' contentious repertoire. In terms of the external behavior, the strategy is so effective that we have essentially witnessed zero protests of any form since last June, and many protest-related civil society groups have also disbanded. Does this, however, also mean that the law has substantially reshaped Hong Kongers' political preferences and resolve to resist? Escribá-Folch (2013) showed cross-nationally that dictators' subtler forms of repression through restricting citizens' civil liberties could sometimes stabilize the regime without losing too much legitimacy. Does the pattern also apply to Hong Kong this time around? Moreover, how does this change affect the future of Hong Kong's political landscape and process of autocratization?

#### 3.1 The dynamics of political preferences in a protest–repression nexus

There has been a fast-growing empirical literature studying both long- and short-term impacts of protests and violent repression on citizens' political preferences in nondemocratic contexts. Based on different country samples, this body of literature consistently finds that repressions immediately lower people's trust in their governments (Sangnier and Zylberberg, 2017; Frye and Borisova, 2019; Neundorf *et al.*, 2020; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021), making the people more conservative and encouraging them to prioritize social order (El-Mallakh, 2020; Tertytchnaya and Lankina, 2020). Moreover, from a longer-term perspective, it also finds that repression can have long-term effects to make people who were exposed long ago to be less trusting of their national leaders and governments (Desposato *et al.*, 2021; Wang, 2021).

Kobayashi *et al.* (2021) and Tung *et al.* (2021), in this special issue, join this collective endeavor by assessing the effects of the NSL as soft repression on the Anti-ELAB Movement. Both groups of researchers leveraged the NSL as an external shock and conducted surveys almost right before and after the law was passed. Kobayashi *et al.* (2021) find experimentally that, despite the immediate sharp decline in protest activities, there was only limited moderation in the opposition's post-NSL support for – as well as the pro-establishment camp's post-NSL antagonism against – the 'Five Demands' compared to the pre-NSL levels.<sup>2</sup> The persistence of democratic ethos among the opposition implies that, while a post-repression society in general could become more conservative, protesters' grievances and aspirations will not fade away easily. This also helps us partially understand the results from Desposato *et al.* (2021) and Wang (2021), which indicate that the psychological scars from historical repression can last for generations among those affected.

<sup>2</sup>Despite with an entirely different theoretical perspective, another similar study that also did two conjoint experiments right before and after the NSL (Kishishita *et al.*, 2021) also find that pro-democracy Hong Kongers' preferences for the 'Five Demands' only waned modestly. What should be noted here is that what both studies captured was only the short-term effect right after the passage of the NSL.

Despite the relative stability of Hong Kongers' preferences regarding democratic reforms, Tung *et al.* (2021) find evidence in their surveys of significant NSL-induced attitudinal changes in institutional trust and heterogeneities in such effects. While the pro-democracy Hong Kongers' post-NSL institutional trust takes a plunge, as the existing literature predicts, the trust conversely goes up by a substantial margin among the pro-establishment camp. Moreover, like Rozenas and Zhukov's (2019) study on the Soviet Union under Stalin, they find the NSL's perceived effectiveness in reining in future protests to be a contributing factor to Hong Kongers' institutional trust. Finally, somewhat differently from Sangnier and Zylberberg's (2017) African study, they find that Hong Kongers' trust in *monitoring* institutions such as the court and the legislature remains relatively intact compared to their trust in the executive institutions after the repression.

Moreover, the political polarization exhibited in both Kobayashi *et al.* (2021) and Tung *et al.* (2021) is supplemented by Shen and Yu's (2021) experimental findings. They find that, although Hong Kong's social polarization can be ameliorated by citizen deliberation and discussion, political polarization continues unabated. While this conclusion may cast a shadow on the future of Hong Kong's political solidarity, it provides another piece of evidence of the long-lasting effects of repression documented in the existing literature.

#### 4. Conclusion: crafting a dictatorship in a post-repression society

The discussion so far has highlighted our new empirical findings regarding the change and persistence of political preferences in post-NSL Hong Kong. Our contributions, however, go well beyond this, shedding further light on the institutional roadmap for crafting a dictatorship through soft repressions. As Escribá-Folch (2013) points out, soft repressions are instrumental to dictators' attempts to stabilize the regime without losing too much legitimacy. Hong Kongers' robust trust in the monitoring institutions as determined by Tung *et al.* (2021) could be readily leveraged by Beijing to transform Hong Kong's political system from within. The examples we have witnessed since June 2021 include convicting dissidents and protesters through the court, organizing new pro-Beijing political parties for the coming elections, and manipulating the electoral rules. As of the writing of this introductory essay, drastic changes in Hong Kong's electoral institutions and the dismantling of its civil society with the aid of the NSL continue to take place. As Hong Kong's autocratization unfolds, we hope this special issue will encourage more studies to investigate its changing political economy and fill the gaps in our understanding of the crafting of a dictatorship.

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