

"One Country, Two System": Expectations and Realities

Madhusoodanan PR*

HSBC, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

*Corresponding author: Madhusoodanan PR, HSBC, Bangalore, Karnataka, India, Tel: 1860 266 2667; E-mail: madhusoodan.pr@gmail.com

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One Country, Two System

Hong Kong was handed over to China on 01 July 1997, and 2017 marks the 20th anniversary year of Hong Kong's return to China. Definitely it is a time to cheer for many, but is it the same for everyone?

It is celebration time for the Chinese government and some pro-China groups in Hong Kong. But majority of the population in Hong Kong and the world outside can only be more dubious as the Chinese administration so far failed to conceive the real spirit of 1984 Sino-British joint declaration. Although celebration this time was the biggest ever since the handover, it is more important to know that more than sixty thousand people came on to the streets for the annual pro-democracy march and to express their dislike against increasing Chinese influence on the territory [1].

The details of the stories from the region show that the increasing and frequent anti-China protests in Hong Kong are not without any reason. During his recent visit to Hong Kong for the 20th anniversary celebration on 01 July 2017, the Chinese President Xi Jinping aggressively spoke against anti-China rhetoric clearly signalling Chinese intolerance to freedom fighters in Hong Kong. Further, the Chinese Foreign Ministry called the Sino-British Joint Declaration "a historical document" that "no longer has any practical significance", meaning there is no legal binding on China.

In fact, the Chinese government's actions are contrary to their assurance to Hong Kong residents. Under the 1984 Sino-British joint declaration, China promised a high degree of autonomy and guaranteed that the territory's way of life would be preserved for "at least 50 years" after the handover, a concept known as "One Country, Two Systems." The declaration also envisaged universal suffrage as an eventual goal, although Hong Kong's most senior leader, Chief Executive, is still elected by a committee of 1,200 selected members and nominally appointed by the Government of China [2].

Now 20 years after the Hong Kong's return to China, it could be observed that the greater freedoms ensured by the declaration have already been eroded at a frightening stride. Now many residents of Hong Kong strongly feel an overall deterioration in the territory's autonomy with increasing influence of Chinese system. Decreasing number of publications against Chinese communist party officials and Beijing's interference in judiciary with its own interpretation of Hong Kong's mini constitution, Basic Law, are only few examples. Increasing curtailment of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and self-censorship in press are quite common [3].

As a reaction to this ever increasing mainland's influence and authoritarian rhetoric, Hong Kong residents staged many protests in the last two decades. There was a mass demonstration on 01 July 2003 when the Chinese government tried to push national security legislation in the form of an anti-subversion law in Hong Kong. Later

in 2014, Hong Kong saw nearly three months of street protests when Beijing refused to grant full democracy to the territory.

This strong and aggressive campaign along with violent clashes in various parts of the city posed one of the greatest populist challenges to Beijing in decades. Currently, many residents believe that their basic freedoms and human rights are diluted and their country is actually being colonised by China. They wanted to keep their identity different from China and regard themselves as Hong Kongers rather than Chinese. Many of them even agree that they were under better rule with the British than the new system [4-6].

In this juncture, the duty and responsibility of the British government is more significant as it was a guarantor of the 1984 declaration. Although China termed it as a document with no practical significance, the British government has commitment to this joint declaration on Hong Kong since it is a formal treaty between China and Britain. The document was also registered with the UN and would remain in force until July 2047.

However, it is unfortunate that the British government has not been vocal enough in its criticism of Beijing's open breaches of the declaration. It is clear that Britain doesn't want to strain its relations with China especially in a post-Brexit world where more trade deals with world outside European Union are inevitable for its economic interests. But as a responsible nation Britain has every responsibility and liability to safeguard the interests of Hong Kongers.

After all, China should recognize the fact that a free and transparent system in Hong Kong would safeguard Chinese interests as well. This is because Hong Kong's special status is the critical reason behind its economic prosperity.

Since an independent and impartial judiciary and free exchange of information are crucial for a major financial centre like Hong Kong, China should respect the concept of "One Country, Two Systems" and at least maintain the status quo in the territory for their own best economic interests. A free and multi-cultural society along with a more developed economy of Hong Kong is the key rationale for many major companies to set up their regional operational hubs in the city. Therefore, any disturbance to the current status of Hong Kong and absence of reforms in the long run would be an expensive affair for the mainland China.

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