

## **Civil Society and Democratization in Hong Kong Paradox and Duality**

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### **Abstract**

Hong Kong is a paradox in democratization and modernization theory: it has a vibrant civil society and high level of economic development, but very slow democratization. Hong Kong's status as a hybrid regime and its power dependence on China shape the dynamics of civil society in Hong Kong. The ideological orientations and organizational form of its civil society, and its detachment from the political society, prevent civil society in Hong Kong from engineering a formidable territory-wide movement to push for institutional reforms. The high level of civil liberties has reduced the sense of urgency, and the protracted transition has led to transition fatigue, making it difficult to sustain popular mobilization. Years of persistent civil society movements, however, have created a perennial legitimacy problem for the government, and drove Beijing to try to set a timetable for full democracy to solve the legitimacy and governance problems of Hong Kong.

**Key words:** Civil society, democratization in Hong Kong, dual structure, hybrid regime, protracted transition, transition fatigue.

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For many a democratization theorist, the slow democratization of Hong Kong is anomalous. As one of the most advanced cities in the world, by as early as the 1980s, Hong Kong had passed the "zone of transition" postulated by the modernization theorists. Hong Kong also had a vibrant civil society, a sizeable middle class, many civil liberties that rivaled Western democracies, one of the freest presses in Asia, and independent courts. However, since decolonization kick-started democratization in the mid-1980s, the progress of democratization in Hong Kong has been painfully slow. If the verdict by the Standing Committee

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of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) materializes, at the earliest, Hong Kong will be able to elect its Chief Executive (CE) in 2017 and its whole Legislative Council (Legco) in 2020 by universal suffrage, more than thirty years after democratization started.

This essay examines the origins of this paradox: that Hong Kong has a relatively free and vibrant civil society but slow democratic development. The power dependence of Hong Kong on China, of course, constrains democratic development in Hong Kong. But this essay tries to show how the dynamics of civil society in Hong Kong, including its ideological orientations, organizational form, and relations with the political society, have affected the democracy movement in Hong Kong. In particular, I argue that the nature of this hybrid regime shapes the nature and direction of civil society development in Hong Kong, demobilizing the democracy movement. In reality, civil society in Hong Kong is good at self-defense, but incapable of coalescing into a sustained territory-wide movement to push for institutional reforms. Challenges from civil society play an important ideological function, delegitimizing the undemocratic system and placing pressure on Beijing to promise reform. Power dependence on Beijing and the low level of mobilization, however, imply that Hong Kong can remain a hybrid for some time, even with Beijing's December 2007 promise of "universal suffrage in 2017."

### **Civil Society and Democratization: A Brief Review of the Literature**

Historically, the struggle for civil society in Europe went hand-in-hand with the struggle for a market economy, both in medieval times and in the struggles in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Both civil society and the market economy were seen as vital public spheres that could be created autonomously from the state, constraining state power and protecting civilian autonomy, thus essential to democratic society.<sup>1</sup> Hence, conceptually, civil society was the sociological counterpart of the market in the economic sphere and of democracy in the political sphere.<sup>2</sup> The idea of civil society functioned as a counter-image of the state, an "embodiment of social virtue confronting political vice, the realm of freedom versus the realm of coercion, of participation versus hierarchy, pluralism versus conformity, spontaneity versus manipulation, purity versus corruption."<sup>3</sup> As a realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Arato, "Civil Society against the State: Poland 1980-81," *TELOS* 47(1981): 23-47, and John Keane, *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon White, "Civil Society, Democratization and Development: Clearing the Analytical Ground," in *Civil Society in Democratization*, ed. Peter Burnell and Peter Calvert (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

generating, autonomous from the state, and bound by a set of shared rules, civil society stands between the state and the private sector.<sup>4</sup>

In this light, a strong civil society alters the balance of power between the state and society, disciplines and monitors the state, redefines the rules of the political game along democratic lines, and acts as an intermediary between the state and society.<sup>5</sup> The literature on democratization sees a vibrant and strong civil society as vital to the development of democracy in various aspects and in different stages of democratization. O'Donnell and Schmitter's seminal study on democratic transition saw "resurrection of civil society," which led to mobilization from below, as a crucial factor in forcing authoritative openings in many third-wave cases.<sup>6</sup> In democratizing societies, civil society can supplement the role of political parties in stimulating political participation, increasing political efficacy, and promoting democratic citizenship.<sup>7</sup> It helps to inculcate tolerance, willingness to compromise, and respect for opposition viewpoints, all deemed vital attitudes and values to a functioning democracy. After democratic institutions are installed, civil society provides a basis for limitation of state power, for control of the state by society, and for the creation of cross-cutting cleavages that mitigate polarized conflicts.<sup>8</sup>

It would be naïve to believe that an autonomous and vibrant civil society alone can easily bring about a democratic regime. O'Donnell and Schmitter were the first to point out that it is impossible for civil society, no matter how strong, to force open an authoritarian regime when the incumbents are unified and inclined to suppression.<sup>9</sup> Alagappa claimed that the democratic role of civil society is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democratization.<sup>10</sup> It plays an important role in delegitimizing authoritarian rule, constructing democratic counter-narratives, and bolstering democratic forces by creating alliances and umbrella groups.<sup>11</sup>

The democratizing effect of civil society depends on a number of factors: political opportunity, different stages of political development, the

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 221.

<sup>5</sup> White, "Civil Society, Democratization and Development," 13-15, and Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 242.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-244.

<sup>9</sup> O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Mathiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Mathiah Alagappa, "Civil Society and Democratic Change: Indeterminate Connection, Transforming Relations," in *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*, ed. Mathiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 486.

strength of civil society, and the role of the state and the political society.<sup>12</sup> Kamrava and O'Mora claimed that for civil society to play an important role in democratization, civil society organizations (CSOs) must be operated democratically, complement their issue-related demands with demands for political democracy, and gain sufficient power by horizontal linkages among CSOs.<sup>13</sup> The CSOs must not be maximalist or uncompromising, or use undemocratic methods. They also must have a certain level of organizational institutionalization, since associational life according to shared rules is the crux of civil society.<sup>14</sup> The above discussions show that the nature, capacity, and institutional configuration of CSOs can be vital factors that determine the impact of civil society on democratization.

Civil society can also face encroachment by the state,<sup>15</sup> as the latter will try to impose its own structure of interests on society and intrude into this autonomous space. Civil society as a public sphere needs to constantly defend itself against these invasions to maintain its autonomy and vibrancy. Thus, the state and society continually negotiate and renegotiate the boundary and autonomy of civil society. To civil society theorists, the struggle to enlarge the public sphere is part and parcel of the political struggle against the state in building a democratic society.

### **The Case of Hong Kong: The Paradox**

Hong Kong is a special case, as it has a highly developed civil society without culmination in a democratic political regime.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1970s, Hong Kong has had a high level of freedom of speech and association and a vibrant civil society, largely free to organize itself and stage social protests. It also has had a sizeable middle class, well-respected civil liberties, independent courts, and Western-style rule of law. The Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, a bilateral agreement to return Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997, began a process of decolonization and democratization.

Many countries in East Asia underwent third-wave democratizations in the 1980s, with popular mobilizations playing major roles in regime transition in the Philippines and South Korea, and top-down reforms and popular pressures combining in Taiwan and Thailand to eventually lead to full democracy.

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<sup>12</sup> Alagappa, *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*.

<sup>13</sup> Mehran Kamrava and Frank O'Mora, "Civil Society and Democratization in Comparative Perspective: Latin America and the Middle East," *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 5 (1998): 893-916.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, and Diamond, *Developing Democracy*.

<sup>15</sup> Laurence Whitehead, "Bowling in the Bronx: The Uncivil Interstices between Civil and Political Society," in *Civil Society in Democratization*, ed. Peter Burnell and Peter Calvert (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 37.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Twenty years later, many East Asian countries succeeded in transition to at least electoral democracies, even if they had started with very autocratic governments and weak civil societies in the 1980s. In contrast, in 2008, Hong Kong's Chief Executive still is elected by an eight-hundred-member Election Committee that represents only the major business, professional, and social groups, whose members are heavily influenced by Beijing. One half of the Legislative Council members is elected by universal suffrage, and the other half is elected by functional constituencies (FCs) that in 2008 represent only a very limited franchise of 230,000 voters who are exclusively from the major business, professional, and social groups. From the introduction of eighteen popularly elected Legco seats in 1991 to thirty popular Legco seats in 2012, it will have taken over twenty years for Hong Kong to increase the ratio of popular Legco seats by 20 percent! The Chief Executive, formerly appointed by the government in London, is elected by an eight-hundred-member Election Committee, *de facto* appointed by Beijing. While Hong Kong was a relatively free, liberal, and open place compared to other regions in Northeast or Southeast Asia in the 1970s, by 2008, it had become a laggard in democratization in the region. The slow growth of democratization in Hong Kong is an anomaly in both modernization and civil society theories centered on democratic transition.

For many years, the study of Hong Kong's democratization was elite-centered, focusing on the bargaining between the Chinese government and the Hong Kong democrats and on actions of state elites. There were relatively few studies of civil society's internal dynamics or how it interacted with and affected the development of democracy in Hong Kong. Sing saw the limited mobilization power of civil society as a constraint on Hong Kong's democratization. To him, declining mobilization resulted from conflicts between prodemocracy CSOs and the political society, the presence of antidemocratic elements in civil society (the bourgeoisie), and the declining support for the political society.<sup>17</sup> However, Sing's treatment of "civil society" included various actors who were commonly not treated as part of civil society, such as the bourgeoisie in Hong Kong who had long been deeply embedded in the state, and political parties which are commonly conceptualized as "political society." He also considered a wide range of extraneous factors, including political culture, to explain the nature of civil society in Hong Kong.

This essay addresses the relationship between civil society and democratic development in Hong Kong. The literature on civil society and democratization focuses mostly on the factors of strength and autonomy, assuming that a more autonomous and stronger civil society has a higher probability than a dependent and underdeveloped one of bringing about liberalization of authoritative

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<sup>17</sup> Sing Ming, *Hong Kong's Tortuous Democratization: A Comparative Analysis* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), chap. 9, and id., "Civil Society, Economic Development and Democratization in Hong Kong," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 26 (1996): 482-504.

governance. This essay shows that we need to look at the nature and internal dynamics of CSOs, for the case of Hong Kong shows that the ideological orientations, organizational forms, and strategies of CSOs can, interacting with the institutional environment of Hong Kong, hamper the local democracy movement.

## **The Dynamics of Civil Society in Hong Kong**

### *Nature and Evolution*

The dominant narrative on Hong Kong politics before the 1980s describes Hong Kong as a low-participation society, with low integration and interaction between state and society.<sup>18</sup> According to this narrative, the refugee society of Hong Kong largely neither challenged the colony's autocratic rule nor demanded social reforms. Recent studies on postwar Hong Kong raise serious doubts about this thesis, as there were major social movements of considerable scale, publicity, and intensity in the postwar years.<sup>19</sup> The colonial regime, however, seldom actively penetrated Chinese society, which means that Hong Kong's civil society had a long history of relative autonomy from the state. Open opposition to the colonial regimes or organizing political movements could be suppressed, but there was ample personal, economic, and societal freedom if one refrained from taking part in formal politics in the postwar colonial society. However, weak horizontal linkages among CSOs caused mobilization from below to be sporadic and discursive.<sup>20</sup>

The rise of student and pressure group movements in the 1970s was commonly seen as a harbinger of the local democracy movement, when a new class of locally born educated youth showed more dedication to Hong Kong than their immigrant parents, and were more eager to correct the ills of the colonial regime. This period was also marked by a rising Hong Kong identity and surging Chinese nationalism, triggered by the entry of the People's Republic of China (PRC) into the United Nations. Socially, shocked by the 1967 leftist riots which lasted for eight months and caused huge economic losses, the colonial government was more willing to listen to public opinion from Hong Kong's Chinese society, and to adopt social reforms to improve the livelihood of the working class. Economic development, rising education levels, and restructuring toward the service industry led to the rise of a new

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<sup>18</sup> Siu-kai Lau, *Society and Politics in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> Wai-man Lam, *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: The Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), and Yick Chau, *Xianggang zuo pai dou zheng shi* [香港左派鬥爭史] [A history of leftist struggles in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Li Man Publishers, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Lau, *Society and Politics in Hong Kong*, and Lam, *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong*.

indigenous middle class. With the government having better tolerance of social movements in the 1970s, a “political opportunity structure” was created for the growth of CSOs.<sup>21</sup> It was a period of liberalization, of more “mobilization from below,” and of “resurrection of civil society” addressing community- and identity-building more than forcing authoritative openings.<sup>22</sup>

As Lui and Chiu<sup>23</sup> pointed out, the CSOs in the 1970s and 1980s had little difficulty in joining together to form *ad hoc* fronts to fight for a common cause. They might have had different ideological inclinations and areas of concern, but they shared a reformist outlook, seeing the various social movements as part of a larger movement of decolonization and regime reform.<sup>24</sup> For many social activists of the time, democratization after decolonization was a natural sequel to the social movements of the 1970s. They also thought that, facing China as the future sovereign master, it was essential to establish a democratic system to protect civil society, freedom, and the lifestyles of Hong Kong’s people, thus they actively participated in the democracy movement in the 1980s. The limited political opportunities and the common experience of fighting against a bureaucratic, closed, colonial administrative state drove them together.<sup>25</sup> They also saw the limited openings in district-level elections in the 1980s as vital institutional resources that could help further social movements and change, and therefore they supported the introduction of popular elections as essential to the realization of social reforms. Successive social and political movements brought the liberal CSOs together,<sup>26</sup> culminating in the formation of the Joint Committee for the Promotion of Democratic Government (JCPDG) in 1986. The JCPDG became an umbrella organization for ninety-five groups from different sectors (including social, religious, labor, educational, housing, and political), and coordinated the democracy movement from 1986 until 1990.<sup>27</sup>

Hong Kong has been a hybrid regime (defined below) since the 1980s. After the trend of liberalization in the 1970s, members of civil society were

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<sup>21</sup> Tai-lok Lui and Wing-kai Chiu, “Introduction—Changing Political Opportunities and the Shaping of Collective Action: Social Movements in Hong Kong,” in *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong*, ed. Wing-kai Chiu and Tai-lok Lui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), 1–20.

<sup>22</sup> Tai-lok Lui, “Sikao ‘jiuqi qian’ yu ‘hou jiuqi’ Xianggang,” [思考「九七前」與「後九七」香港] [Thinking about “Pre-97” and “Post-97”], in *Women de difang, women de shijian: Xianggang shehui xinbian*, [我們的地方，我們的時間：香港社會新編] [Our place, our time: A new introduction to Hong Kong society], ed. Jun-cai Xie (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002), 449–475.

<sup>23</sup> Lui and Chiu, “Introduction—Changing Political Opportunities.”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> See Ngok Ma, *Political Development in Hong Kong: State, Political Society, and Civil Society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 137.

<sup>27</sup> Ming Sing, “Governing Elites, External Events and Pro-Democratic Opposition in Hong Kong (1986–2002),” *Government and Opposition* 38, no.4 (2003): 456–478.

largely free to protest against the government in Hong Kong, with little fear of being prosecuted. Although a series of quite stringent public order laws was still in place, these laws were seldom applied after the 1970s. The Bill of Rights Ordinance was enacted in 1991, which incorporated most human rights protection in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) into local legislation. Since 1997, Chapter Three of the Basic Law has guaranteed a full set of civil liberties that rivals Western liberal democracies. Thus, although its government never has been popularly elected, Hong Kong society is largely free, or as some have termed it, Hong Kong is a “liberal autocracy.”<sup>28</sup>

The constitutional guarantee of freedom in the Basic Law does not mean that there is no encroachment by the state; the state must intervene, however, in a subtle manner. In Hong Kong, the harnessing of civil society cannot be done in the old-fashioned autocratic manner by means of legal control or prosecution, as Beijing wants to preserve the image of a free Hong Kong. Ma has detailed how the post-1997 state has led various fronts of encroachments into the civil society of Hong Kong, including through tactics of co-optation and neutralization.<sup>29</sup> The state also engineers a network of progovernment societal organizations that is parallel to the major liberal CSOs in order to balance their influence. This weakens mobilization from below, as the conservative CSOs compete for members’ loyalty and interest representation, help government propaganda, and encumber the legs of the more progressive movements. The two strands of CSOs that compete for mass support, public discourse, and social resources are a “dual structure” of CSOs that has become institutionalized in Hong Kong.<sup>30</sup>

Hong Kong is a hybrid regime in another sense. Partial elections were introduced in the 1980s, and popular elections for a portion of the legislature in 1991. Although popularly elected members never have constituted more than half of the legislature, the popular elections that have been held have been run mostly in a free and fair manner. This makes Hong Kong a “semi-democracy,” with the government not popularly elected, but with limited popular elections for Legco that enable the prodemocracy opposition to win a minority of seats in the legislature and the public to express its political opinion.

The political changes in Hong Kong in the 1980s were similar to O’Donnell and Schmitter’s prescription: liberalization was followed by a partial opening, by resurrection of civil society, and by the formation of a political opposition that drew widespread support from CSOs.<sup>31</sup> It also fit the predictions of

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<sup>28</sup> Kuan Hsin-chi and Lau Siu-kai, “Between Liberal Autocracy and Democracy: Democratic Legitimacy in Hong Kong,” *Democratization* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 58-76.

<sup>29</sup> Ma, *Political Development in Hong Kong*, chap. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-191.

<sup>31</sup> O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, chaps. 2-5.

modernization theory: rapid industrialization and economic development brought about a new middle class that demanded channels of participation and power-sharing. However, the demands for progressive democratization were thwarted by the sovereign masters and the local conservatives, resulting in a protracted democratic transition for more than twenty years. While power imbalance between Hong Kong and China has been the key factor determining Hong Kong's path of democratization, problems with the civil society in Hong Kong have served to weaken the local prodemocracy movement, leading to a gradual demobilization of the democracy movement since the 1990s.

### ***The Issue of Ideology and Strategy***

Theories about civil society became very popular among social activists in Hong Kong in the 1990s for several reasons. The democratic revolution in Eastern Europe certainly provided inspiration, especially for the Hong Kong activists who envisaged themselves facing a post-totalitarian state intent on strong social and political control after 1997. In addition, activists of the 1990s' generation commonly were inspired by the 1989 Beijing student movement. The romanticism and tragic ending of the youth, their anti-establishment fervor, their zeal for self-determination and autonomy from authority, and their reference to an autonomous public sphere all drew the Hong Kong young activists to imitate and flock toward theories about civil society movements. The then current democratic literature on civil society attracted many activists, who took it as the theoretical basis for their movements. Choy et al. pointed out that the student movement in the early 1990s tended to focus on particularistic issues, not on the general political scene.<sup>32</sup> Student activists were post-materialist in outlook and preferred to engage in movements about gender, gay rights, the environment, cultural and heritage politics, and so on, rather than in movements to reform governmental institutions. Many of this new generation of activists became leaders of some of the most vocal liberal CSOs in the 1990s and beyond.<sup>33</sup>

The new activists were attracted more by the concepts of public space and ethical civil society than by the idea of the formation of a Solidarity-like political movement to topple the undemocratic regime. Compared to the older generation of political activists, the leaders of which had become party politicians after partial elections were introduced into the legislature in the 1990s, these young activists were more anti-establishment and less interested in the formalistic channels of participation such as parties and elections, and they stressed spontaneity, equality in participation, and empowerment of the

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<sup>32</sup> Chi-keung Choy, Yan-yin Wong, Yiu-cheong Tsoi, and Yiu-kwong Chong, eds., *Pan ni sui yue: Xianggang xue yun wen xian xuan ji* [叛逆歲月：香港學運文獻選輯] [Selected essays on Hong Kong student movements] (Hong Kong: Qing wen shu wu, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Ma, *Political Development in Hong Kong*, 205-206.

concerned publics. They saw themselves as part of the civil society that should monitor the state and the party politicians, and chose to distance themselves from political parties, dismissing them as part of the establishment and electoral machines intent on seizing power.

This coincided with the wave of “new social movements” over CSOs in the early 1990s. The new movement philosophy stressed thorough discussions among participants about the goals and courses of action and collective decisions. It valued equality between the organizers and the masses and direct dialogue between the masses and those in power, often with the help of confrontational actions whose participants shunned the mediation of politicians or the mass media.<sup>34</sup> This coincided with the wave of “new social movements” over CSOs in the early 1990s. The new movement philosophy stressed thorough discussions among participants about the goals and courses of action and collective decisions. It valued equality between the organizers and the masses and direct dialogue between the masses and those in power, often with the help of confrontational actions whose participants shunned the mediation of politicians or the mass media.<sup>35</sup>

Before the 1990s, the liberal CSOs saw the limited openings for elected seats in local councils and the Legislative Council as “wars of position,”<sup>36</sup> which would bring them vital institutional resources that would further their movement. They thus actively mobilized to field or support candidates in these elections. By the early 1990s, the prowess of the limited elections was quickly dismissed as a myth. Limited to a minority in most of the elected councils in a partly democratized regime, the prodemocracy councilors could not effect as many policy changes as they had wished. Elected politicians’ preferences or incentives were also different from those of the social activists. The politicians were more constrained by mainstream public opinion, more bent on compromise, and also loath to support radical or confrontational actions

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<sup>34</sup> Kit-ling Luk, “Buyiyang de tiankong—Xunqiu qunzhong liliang de xin shehuixingdong” [不一樣的天空—尋求群眾力量的新社會行動] [New social action appealing for the force of the masses], in *Community Development Resource Handbook, 1993 & 1994*, Hong Kong Council of Social Services (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Council of Social Services, 1994), 41-44, and Hing-luen Mok and Sam W.K. Yu, “Fansi xinshehuixingdong de chongji , kongjian ji jiazhi” [反思新社會行動的衝擊、空間及價值], [Rethinking new social action in Hong Kong], in *Community Development Resource Book, 1995 & 1996: Community Development: Challenges and Change*, ed. Hong Kong Council of Social Services (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Council of Social Services, 1996), 81-96.

<sup>35</sup> Lui and Chiu, “Introduction—Changing Political Opportunities,” and On-kwok Lai, “Greening of Hong Kong?—Forms of Manifestation of Environmental Movements,” in *The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong*, ed. Stephen Chiu and Tai-lok Lui (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2000), 259-295.

<sup>36</sup> Public Policy Research Center, ed., *Weizhi zhizhan: Quyihui de guoqu yu weilai* [位置之戰：區議會的過去與未來] [War of position: The past and future of the District Boards] (Hong Kong: Wide Angle Press, 1985).

of some grass-roots CSOs. The onset of party politics in the 1990s brought new conflicts between the prodemocracy parties and the liberal CSOs. Parties were focused on maximizing electoral gains and wanted to convert the CSOs into their support bases, while the CSOs were more concerned about their own particularistic concerns and societal autonomy. In the end, many liberal CSOs preferred to stay away from party and electoral politics, as they believed that it was more important to maintain the autonomy and identity of the civil society movements.

This difference in ideological orientations and the conflicts in political interest led to a gradual detachment of the mainstream democracy movement from the liberal CSOs in the 1990s. While many of the 1980s' leaders had turned themselves into party politicians intent on seizing more institutional power through the electoral arena and constitutional reforms, the younger generation preferred to stay outside the establishment, and were concerned with more particularistic issues. The result has been a "hollowing out" of the democracy movement and a lower level of mobilization since the 1990s.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Discursive Organizational Forms***

The changing ideological orientations of the liberal CSOs in Hong Kong were closely related to their preferred form of organization and movement. The leaders of the democracy movement would have preferred a strong territory-wide organization that included all liberal CSOs in a Solidarity-like manner, to consolidate resources in order to push forward the democracy movement. The liberal CSOs, however, detested formalization and were afraid that they would be absorbed as electoral machines of the prodemocracy parties and lose their autonomy. Instead of unifying into a formal alliance, since the mid-1990s, they have opted to act in *ad hoc* loose fronts to maintain their flexibility and autonomy. CSOs with similar concerns have joined hands for a series of actions, usually over a certain policy issue, cause, or incident. There usually has been no formal organization and/or few organizational resources (e.g., there is no paid staff for the coalition), and the coalition usually does not even formally register as an organization or society. The *ad hoc* united fronts usually last only weeks or months, and are inactivated or dissolved after the passing of the issue or the series of actions.

A survey on social movements after 1997 shows that this kind of *ad hoc* united front is very common. From January 1998 to December 2007, a total of 453 such united fronts engaged in social movements, accounting for 1,764 social actions, on average 176 actions every year (see table 1).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ming Sing, "Governing Elites, External Events and Pro-Democratic Opposition."

<sup>38</sup> I counted the frequency of social actions (including street-level protests, signature campaigns, press conferences, public declarations of positions, petitions to the government or the Legco, legal actions, and so on) involving CSOs in major newspaper reports, in the name of "coalitions," "joint conferences," "united fronts," and the like.

Table 1. Breakdown of United Front Actions by Areas of Concern, 1997-2007

Sector	No. of Fronts	No. of Actions
Professional/sectoral interests	92 (20.31%)	333 (18.88%)
Welfare	59 (13.02%)	259 (14.68%)
Human Rights	31 ( 6.84%)	110 ( 6.24%)
Housing	66 (14.57%)	241 (13.66%)
Education	38 ( 8.39%)	125 ( 7.09%)
Medical	15 ( 3.31%)	53 ( 3.00%)
Environment	17 ( 3.75%)	30 ( 1.70%)
Transport	38 ( 8.39%)	83 ( 4.71%)
Labor issues	21 ( 4.64%)	179 (10.15%)
Constitutional / Democratization	18 ( 3.97%)	171 ( 9.69%)
Others	58 (12.80%)	180 (10.20%)
Total	453	1,764

Source: Author's calculation from press reports.

There are a few interesting observations from this survey of united-front actions. First, a large number of these fronts have engaged in few social actions over a span of ten years. A total of 219 fronts (48.3 percent of all fronts) participated in only one action between 1998 and 2007. Another 173 (38.2 percent of the total) participated in no more than five actions, which means that 86.5 percent of these fronts engaged in no more than five actions over a span of ten years. The data show that many united-front groups were *ad hoc* alliances formed for targeted actions for a specific event or government policy proposal. After the proposal was dropped or adopted, these coalitions ceased to operate. The second observation is that these united fronts covered a wide range of issues, from education, social welfare, unemployment/poverty, human rights, and democratic development, to medical issues, and that there was no predominant policy area in terms of frequency of action. The research reveals that *ad hoc* alliances are popular among CSOs of different natures and in different policy areas.

There are obvious limitations to this *ad hoc*, united-front organizational form. It is popular because it is flexible and does not require many organizational resources. As the CSOs stress equal participation and are very conscious of their own identities, the lack of a common and stable organization allows the members to withdraw at any time. They can join a front if they want to participate in a certain course of action, and if the issue is over, and/or the course of action or purpose of the united front has changed, they can safely withdraw from the coalition without any significant costs. They need not fear that the organization will be usurped or dominated by some larger organizations, as even if this were

to happen, they could easily withdraw and initiate another front. The choice of this organizational form more or less reflects a lack of mutual trust among CSOs and between them and Hong Kong's larger political groups.

Post-1997 experience shows that the *ad hoc* organizational format has been effective at self-defense: defending civil society in the face of encroachment from the state, as demonstrated by the experience of the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) against national security legislation in 2003.<sup>39</sup> The CHRF was a collection of more than forty groups with very different interests and ideological convictions, formed in September 2002. The only common interests among these groups were their concern about human rights issues and their opposition to the national security legislation that was proposed by the Hong Kong government in 2002. The *ad hoc* alliance, however, allowed maximum participation by groups from different sectors and ideological flavors, without requiring them to subordinate themselves to a single organization. They could appeal to their respective publics by agreeing on only some very general principles (e.g., defending civil liberties). This facilitated swift action and mobilization during crisis, but without a formal organization, it is difficult for this type of united front to sustain a movement for a long time.

The CHRF was very successful in mobilizing 500,000 people to come into the streets on July 1, 2003, to oppose the impending enactment of the National Security Bill, which many in Hong Kong believed was over-stringent and would enable the state to curb civil liberties. However, when the democrats tried to turn the CHRF into a more formal organization after the 2003 march to coordinate the democracy movement, the alliance quickly fell apart. Professional bodies and human rights groups saw themselves as nonpolitical and were loath to join a full-scale political movement. Grass-roots and labor groups were afraid that the movement would be transformed to one that was chiefly political or constitutional in nature, and that class issues would be neglected. Some more radical groups that traditionally had grudges against the mainstream democrats feared that they and the movement would be used by the latter to further their electoral interests. As a result, the CHRF was quickly in disarray after 2004, and failed to become an umbrella organization that could coordinate the democracy movement as the JCPDG had done in the 1980s. Post-1997 experiences in other movement areas also showed that it is difficult for this form of loose united front to sustain itself for long, or to accumulate enough organizational strength, experience, or mutual trust to build a strong movement to push for policy or institutional changes. Participation of civil society in movements through *ad hoc* organizational groups was bound to be sporadic, spontaneous, and dependent on the initiative of individual participants and the

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<sup>39</sup> See Ma, *Political Development in Hong Kong*, 210-219, and Ngok Ma, "Civil Society in Self-Defense: The Struggle against National Security in Hong Kong," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 44 (2005): 465-482.

general political climate, making it difficult to effect institutional changes.

### Civil Society in a Hybrid Regime

Hong Kong has been a hybrid regime for more than twenty years. Hybrid regimes, or similar concepts such as “semi-democracies,” “semi-authoritarianism,” “competitive authoritarianism,” “illiberal democracies,” electoral democracies,” and the like, refer to a group of regimes that fall short of modern standards of liberal democracies, yet are not totally authoritarian.<sup>40</sup> They are distinguished from authoritarian states as they rely on some form of elections as the basis of legitimacy, although the elections may be manipulated to guarantee victory for the incumbents. There is some space for civil society, opposition groups, or even independent courts.

Scholars differ on the prospects of hybrid regimes, that is, on how long a hybrid regime can remain hybrid. The optimistic view has it that hybrid regimes face inherent tensions and will find it difficult to stay hybrid forever. Case argued that semi-democracies are “intrinsically unstable,” as each liberalizing concession from the state triggers pressures for more reforms.<sup>41</sup> There is a perennial legitimacy problem for the regime, and under international pressure, it is difficult for the incumbents to manipulate the elections for very long. When economic adversity or other changes create a renewed crisis, the incumbents are pressed to move toward genuine democracy. In contrast, pessimists claim that limited elections and partial freedom help to let the public vent their dissatisfaction and social demands, thus serving to defuse opposition sentiment and weaken the impetus for regime change. By allowing limited representation in partial elections, the incumbents can engage the opposition in a semi-open structure and avoid open rupture. The long period of semi-authoritarianism can also lead to “transition fatigue,” as stagnation in political and social changes can dampen enthusiasm for reform and lead to a gradual acceptance of the current regime form.

Hong Kong’s constitutional status as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) means that Hong Kong cannot decide its own constitutional future.

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<sup>40</sup> David Collier and Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics* 49 (1997): 430-451; Martina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003); Larry Diamond, “Thinking about Hybrid Regimes,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 21-35; Donald Share, “Transition to Democracy and Transition through Transaction,” *Comparative Political Studies* 19, no. 4 (1987): 525-548; Steven Levitsky and Lucian Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no.2 (2002): 51-65; William Case, “Can the ‘Halfway House’ Stand? Semidemocracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries,” *Comparative Politics* 28, no. 2 (1996): 437-464; and Fareed Zakaria, ed., *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Case, “Can the ‘Halfway House’ Stand?” 438.

The Basic Law stipulates that changes to the electoral methods for selecting the CE and the Legislative Council must have the approval of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Authorities in Beijing are always skeptical about granting full democracy to Hong Kong, but since the 1980s, they have known that granting partial elections would help to pacify the community. This set the stage for the hybrid regime in Hong Kong. Power dependence on China remains the most decisive constraint on Hong Kong's constitutional development.<sup>42</sup> Hong Kong's experience shows that the nature of the hybrid regime conditions and shapes the development of civil society, prompting transition fatigue and affecting the strategic choices of the CSOs in Hong Kong.

### ***Transition Fatigue***

Since Hong Kong does not have the power to determine its constitutional structure, Hong Kong democrats have to repeatedly bargain with Beijing to speed up the process. This iterated bargaining has lasted for more than twenty years. The protracted transition has led to "transition fatigue"<sup>43</sup> among Hong Kong's people, which has had a demobilizing effect. On the one hand, the protracted transition makes it difficult for the opposition to maintain momentum for a long period of time. Shortly after the handover of sovereignty in 1997, the democracy movement in Hong Kong saw a downturn. The pace of democratization in Hong Kong in 1997 through 2007 was defined by the Basic Law, and the power of amendment of the Basic Law lies with the National People's Congress in Beijing. Hong Kong can propose amendments if most of the political forces agree to a proposal,<sup>44</sup> but the political structure cannot be changed without the consent of Beijing. In addition, after 1997, the policy-making power of the Legco was much curtailed because of the Basic Law constraints on private members' bills and amendments.<sup>45</sup> Coupled with fragmentation in the Legco, this disabled the prodemocracy politicians from exercising much policy influence on the government. The economic downturn caused by the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, turned the public's attention from political or constitutional issues to bread-and-butter concerns instead.

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<sup>42</sup> Hsin-chi Kuan, "Power Dependence and Democratic Transition: The Case of Hong Kong," *China Quarterly* 128 (December 1991): 774-793.

<sup>43</sup> Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*.

<sup>44</sup> According to article 159 of the Basic Law, an amendment to the Basic Law can be initiated from Hong Kong if all of the following three parties agree: (a) the Chief Executive; (b) a two-thirds majority of the Legislative Council; and (c) two-thirds of the Hong Kong deputies to the National People's Congress.

<sup>45</sup> According to article 74 of the Basic Law, legislators can raise bills in the Legco only if the bills are not related to government structure, operation of government, or government expenditure. Bills, motions, and amendments proposed by legislators also need to be passed by more than half of the members from both the FCs and the popularly elected members, making it easy for a minority of legislators to veto private proposals.

The partisan struggles within the fragmented legislature, with few real policy changes amid an economic recession, did not appeal to the general public. The friction led to declining confidence in the partially democratic structure, and in elections and party politics, in general.

The economic downturn, repeated government scandals, and problematic reforms created a governing crisis by 2002-2003, resulting in the 500,000-strong rally against the government on July 1, 2003, and a rebirth of the democracy movement. But the momentum of the movement gradually wilted after Beijing ruled out a rapid transition to full democracy. The NPCSC handed down a verdict in April 2004, ruling out universal suffrage for 2007-2008, which was followed by a gradual demobilization. Helped by a timely economic rebound and the replacement of the much-maligned Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa by the more popular Donald Tsang, the SAR government recovered some of its support. The rallies in support of democracy after 2003 showed fluctuating but declining public participation (see table 2). There were reports that, by 2007, the veteran democrats, who had been fighting for democracy for more than twenty years, were in a state of fatigue and had become more ready to compromise in exchange for a proposal which promised ultimate universal suffrage.<sup>46</sup>

A protracted democratic transition is also likely to bring about debates about strategy in the opposition movement.<sup>47</sup> To begin with, it is difficult to maintain a unified opposition movement for long with no tangible political spoils and no clear endpoint. The gradual democratization in Hong Kong led to major debates over the opposition's strategy. One rift was between the "civil society" road and the "parliamentary" road, mentioned above. The mainstream democrats, who had become party politicians, emphasized the importance of the institutional resources of elected councils, the importance of public recognition as a prodemocracy opposition, and the ability to show that they were a "credible alternative" to the incumbent elites by participating in the establishment and the partially elected councils. Many liberal CSOs, however, believed that, since the prodemocracy minority opposition could not effect many policy changes or gain much headway in forcing institutional reforms, the movement should be more pluralistic. The focus, they maintained, should be on the preservation of the autonomy of civil society from the state and the conservation of more resources of the movement within the realm of civil society.

There were also debates within the prodemocracy parties over movement

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<sup>46</sup> Xianzhi Li, "DP Showed Compromise; CTU Unhappy about Premature Gesture" [民主黨擺明願妥協，職工盟不滿早露底] *Ming Pao Daily News*, July 20, 2007, A04.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Gillespie, "Factionalism, the Left and the Transition to Democracy in Spain," in *Factional Politics and Democratization*, ed. Richard Gillespie, Michael Waller, and Lourdes Lopez Diato (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 45-63.

Table 2. Number of Participants in Prodemocracy Rallies since 2003

Date	Theme	Organizers estimation	Police estimation
July 1, '03	Against Article 23	500,000	350,000
Jan. 1, '04	Universal suffrage 2007/08	100,000	37,000
Apr. 11, '04	Against NPCSC's vetoing of universal suffrage	20,000	10,000
July 1, '04	Universal suffrage	530,000	200,000
Jan. 23, '04	Universal suffrage in 2007-2008, oppose government-business collusion and widening income gap	2,000	Less than 2,000
Apr. 24, '05	Oppose Beijing's interpretation of the Basic Law over the term of the next chief executive	1,500	1,000
July 1, '05	Universal suffrage and democracy	21,000	11,000
Dec. 4, '05	Universal suffrage and democracy	250,000	63,000
July 1, '06	Universal suffrage and democracy	58,000	28,000
Mar.18, '07	Universal suffrage in 2012	5,000	1,800
July 1, '07	Universal suffrage in 2012	68,000	20,000
Oct. 8, '07	Universal suffrage in 2012	7,000	4,000
Jan. 13, '08	Universal suffrage in 2012	22,000	6,800
July 1, '08	Various themes	47,000	15,500

Source: Author's compilation of press reports.

strategy. In 1998, a factional struggle broke out within the Democratic Party, the largest prodemocracy party, over strategy and ideological positioning. The Young Turks, a faction of younger local councilors, were more inclined than the party leaders toward greater confrontation, street-level movements, and a stronger pro-grassroots position. The factional struggle led to a split within the party, triggering a series of reconfigurations within the prodemocracy camp,<sup>48</sup> thus making it more difficult to form a consolidated and integrated democracy movement.

### *Civil Society in a Liberal Autocracy*

The constitutional constraint from Beijing does not necessarily mean that mobilization of civil society is useless in helping the democratization of Hong Kong. Sing has shown that, since the 1980s, increased mobilization has usually led to more concessions from Beijing.<sup>49</sup> However, the combination of the

<sup>48</sup> Ngok Ma, "Factionalism in the Democratic Party and the 2000 Election," in *Out of the Shadow of 1997? The 2000 Legislative Council Elections in Hong Kong*, ed. Hsin-chi Kuan, Siu-kai Lau, and Timothy K.Y. Wong (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002), 125-159.

<sup>49</sup> Sing, "Governing Elites, External Events and Pro-Democratic Opposition in Hong Kong."

constitutional setup as a “liberal autocracy,” the dual structure of civil society, the protracted transition, and the partial elections has demobilized the civil society of Hong Kong. These factors also have contributed to the special pattern of ideology and the organizational form of civil society in Hong Kong.

First, the high level of civil liberties in Hong Kong reduces the pressure for a unified opposition in a Solidarity-like manner. Although the democrats and liberal CSOs are marginalized from the power structure and face encroachment on their autonomy and freedom at times, they are almost never prosecuted, and enjoy reasonable freedoms of speech, association, and action. The CSOs have seen little urgency in forming one single territory-wide organization to resist oppression. The lack of perceived urgency also has driven them to insist on their own autonomy and self-identity, instead of uniting into one single political opposition with institutional reform as their goal.

In this sense, the ample freedom enjoyed by the CSOs is a double-edged sword: it allows the Hong Kong people to join protests and movements with relatively low risk of facing arrest or political persecution, which has helped to foster the development of civil society in Hong Kong. But it also has led average people to be less dissatisfied with the undemocratic regime, because they do not feel oppressed, and do not have a sense of urgency that the system must be reformed. If the CSOs or the general public perceive a great threat to their survival or autonomy, as was the case when the government proposed national security legislation, they may coalesce and rise for action. But as the fear subsides, they quickly go back to their own backyards. However, events such as the July 1, 2003 march—sparked by policy fiascos, economic downturn, and fear of loss of personal freedom, all leading to a public outcry strong enough to shake the incumbents—cannot be expected to happen very often.

Second, power dependence on China makes the CSOs hesitant to place all of their eggs in the basket of the democracy movement; they prefer to use their energy and resources in preserving an autonomous public space. The CSOs tend to believe that it is difficult to change Beijing’s mind by means of one or two movements, and that it is more important to have a sustained struggle. The dual structure of CSOs and encroachments by the state also makes them believe that their freedom and autonomy is more fragile than most people think. It is rational for them to choose to diversify their movements into different strands, emphasizing the preservation of autonomous public space to provide a reserve of resistance that is vital for sustaining a protracted struggle.

From a theoretical standpoint, Hong Kong’s case teaches us several things about hybrid regimes and the relationship between civil society and democratization. Conventional studies on civil society assume that an autonomous and strong civil society is best able to bring about democratization. The analytical focus has been on the autonomy and strength of a civil society. But as Kamrava and O’Mora have argued, the role of civil society in democratization has been mitigated by several features of CSOs: their level

of organizational institutionalization, the horizontal linkage among CSOs, their internal operations, their ideological orientations, and the ability to link the CSO movements to the overall political agenda.<sup>50</sup> In the case of Hong Kong, the ideological orientations of the CSOs, the CSOs' relations with the political society, the capacity for horizontal linkage, and organizational institutionalization all pointed to a sporadic and disjointed form of movement, hampering the capacity of the vibrant and free civil society in Hong Kong to place significant pressure on the Chinese government for more progressive democratization. Included among the problem areas are:

- (1) The ideological inclination toward “ethical civil society” that drove the liberal CSOs to focus on maintaining autonomy of the public sphere, making them less compromising and more identity-conscious, and causing them to refrain from forming a pragmatic political movement that was intent on the seizure of political power.
- (2) Low levels of horizontal linkage and organization institutionalization, which mean that liberal CSOs cannot accumulate enough resources to enhance their mobilization power and bargaining power vis-à-vis the incumbents, or sustain mobilization for the cause of democratization.
- (3) Weak linkages between political society and civil society due to differences in ideological orientation and strategic convictions, as well as the inability to entice many liberal CSOs to join the political movement for democracy; both weaken the prodemocracy movement.

These factors make it difficult for the democracy movement in Hong Kong to have sustained mobilization, giving rise to cycles of mobilization and demobilization. The prodemocracy opposition in Hong Kong has not had the organizational resources to sustain a high level of mobilization for a long period of time. When there have been major economic or government failures (as in 2003), or when the government has been seen to seriously infringe on the autonomy of civil society, the civil society has risen to the occasion to spur progressive democratization. Yet, when the crisis has subsided and/or economic conditions have improved, the public has become content with the status quo and mobilization quickly has died down. Hong Kong civil society is better equipped to defend itself against state encroachment than to coalesce into a formidable territory-wide movement to force institutional reforms.

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<sup>50</sup> Kamrava and O'Mora, “Civil Society and Democratization in Comparative Perspective.”

## Glass Half-Full or Half-Empty?

Just as scholars differ on the prospects of hybrid regimes, there can be both a pessimistic and an optimistic way of assessing the democratic development of Hong Kong by 2008. From the pessimistic point of view, progress is very slow and the endpoint is not guaranteed. Even with the NPCSC verdict on 2017 universal suffrage, Hong Kong democrats still doubt that it will become a reality, and they think that Beijing will still try to control the nominations of CE candidates before they are subject to popular vote, making Hong Kong nothing more than a pseudo-democracy.<sup>51</sup> From the optimistic point of view, years of stop-and-go democracy movements have driven the Central Government to finally promise universal suffrage as early as 2017 for the CE and perhaps by 2020 for the whole Legco. If leaders in Beijing renege on their promises or impose undue constraints on popular elections, they are likely to face further protests. That is, years of democratic movement and civil society action have finally born fruit, albeit at a very slow pace and still marked by considerable uncertainties.

How can we assess the role of civil society in Hong Kong's democratization? Alagappa thinks that the major democratizing roles of civil society lie in delegitimizing the undemocratic regime, raising counter-narratives, and forming alliances to force open authoritarian governments. Hong Kong's civil society largely failed in the alliance-formation function, but played an important role in undermining the legitimacy of the undemocratic system and promoting democratic values. Hong Kong's transition is special in that universal suffrage is stated as the ultimate constitutional goal in the Basic Law; consequently, the incumbents in Beijing or Hong Kong cannot dismiss universal suffrage as bad and not suitable for Hong Kong. Over the years, repeated ideological debates and struggles over democratization have allowed the democrats in Hong Kong to defeat most of the excuses of the conservatives in defending the region's undemocratic system. With civil liberties intact, it is difficult to convince the Hong Kong people that they are smart enough to exercise all their economic, social, and civil freedoms, but too stupid to elect their government. The constitutional guarantee of freedom causes policy problems and bad governance to be fully exposed, and allows the democrats to freely demand democratic reforms, creating a perennial legitimacy problem for the Hong Kong government. The unsatisfactory performance of the Tung Chee-hwa government after 1997 did much to destroy the myth of the capability of the nonelected bureaucratic polity. Because Hong Kong people buy into Western values of liberty, rule of law, and democracy, and there is a constitutional

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<sup>51</sup> Article 45 of the Basic Law stipulates that a "broadly representative" nomination committee will be responsible for nominating the CE candidates, before they are subject to popular vote. The composition of this nomination committee has not been specified.

guarantee of ultimate full democracy, it will be difficult for the nonelected Hong Kong government to justify its undemocratic origins forever.

By 2008, Beijing, the SAR government, and local conservatives all acknowledged the need to implement full democracy some time in the future. Most of the stakeholders have acknowledged that Hong Kong people are overwhelmingly supportive of democracy. Repeated sporadic protests on various fronts have hurt the governability of the government, and the recurrence of the legitimacy problems has driven the Central Government to try to solve the democratic problem once and for all. The 2007 NPCSC verdict was thus a pragmatic solution by Beijing to try to stop, or at least temper, the never-ending debate about universal suffrage in Hong Kong, without genuinely believing that full democracy is good for the SAR. In this light, civil society in Hong Kong has played an important role in bringing about democratic progress through its ideological function of projecting democracy as a better alternative than the nonelected bureaucratic polity. It can always be argued that, had civil society been better organized or more resourceful, it could have accelerated the process.

The road ahead for Hong Kong can still be tortuously long. There is always the temptation for the incumbents to reverse the process, manipulate elections, and control civil society movements. Such potentialities highlight the important role of the self-defense function of civil society in Hong Kong. Power dependence on China means that, if China is unwilling to grant full democracy and persists in controlling the electoral process in Hong Kong, the SAR can remain hybrid for some years to come, with future electoral arrangements for the CE and Legco falling short of standards of Western liberal democracies. Nevertheless, as long as civil society in Hong Kong stays free and autonomous, it is likely to continue to rise against future reversals of liberalization and to push to reform pseudo-democratic systems in the future. The civil society hence has a “reserve of influence” function in a hybrid regime. A vibrant civil society will remain an important player in the continuing struggle for the autonomy, legitimacy, and genuine and full democracy of the future Hong Kong.

