

Media Advisory

“Defending Democracy: Hong Kong under Chinese Influence and Taiwan’s Countermeasures”

Panel Discussion

The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) held a panel discussion on November 21st in Taipei between scholars and democratic activists from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Titled “Defending Democracy: Hong Kong under Chinese Influence and Taiwan’s Countermeasures,” the discussion was about how Hong Kong’s democracy and society have changed under China’s influence and how Taiwan can learn from the Hong Kong experience in order to counter such influence.

The Hong Kong Civil Hub published report “China’s Sharp Power in Hong Kong” in September, showing how Hong Kong has become the “experimental ground” of China’s sharp power, which the Chinese Communist Party would apply to other free societies after the tactics have been tested in the autonomous city. Similarly, in the recently-published US-China Economic and Security Review Commission’s annual report, it has been pointed out that Beijing has continued to encroach on Hong Kong’s political autonomy.

Nathan Law, who was elected at the age of 23 to Hong Kong’s legislature and got disqualified, said at the panel in Taipei that the Commission’s report has recommended the US to reassess its policy of treating Hong Kong and China as separate customs areas, as Beijing has continued to take Hong Kong as a legitimate front to bypass trade barriers and import sensitive military-related products to Chinese mainland and even to North Korea and Iraq. “The US has come to realize the harms the Chinese government could do to the US national security via Hong Kong,” Law said.

Beijing expects Hong Kong to follow Singapore’s example, being an entity with a government that is “not *by the people* but is still able to be *for the people*,” but for Hong Kong, Law said, political suffocation only harms its economic openness. “Hong Kong would only have a government that is by the PRC, of the PRC, and for the PRC.”

Academia Sinica Institute of Taiwan History associate research fellow Wu Ruei-ren, who has been paying close attention to Hong Kong’s democratic movements in the past years, said the concept of sharp power is authoritarian powers’ malign corrosion of other sovereign countries via manipulation and cooptation. What Beijing has been doing to Hong Kong, however, is a suzerain exercising its ruling power over its sphere of control. “The series of suppression after the Umbrella Movement is belated house-cleaning; Beijing is neutralizing the influence of the native political elites, ‘putting down’ [rebellions in] Hong Kong,” Wu said.

Wu stressed that Beijing's sharp power against Taiwan, on the other hand, is "combined attacks," including military intimidation and reaching to local pro-China collaborators. "As the elections approach, we have witnessed that China's sharp power has already made its way into Taiwan," he said, adding that the "time lag" created by sharp power's indirectness may have made us slow to realize its intention, but "Taiwan in the recent years has started to understand that it is impossible to separate politics from the economic and cultural spheres and that we need to have a renewed understanding of China's totalitarianism."

What Taiwan needs to do now is to expose China's influence, make good use of the fact that Taiwan is a sovereign country to establish our internal security mechanisms, and reiterate democratic values to inoculate the Taiwanese people against the influence of sharp power, Wu said.

The US once believed that incorporating China into the liberal economic system could lead China to democratization, but what we see now is that China's anti-democratic ideology has proliferated and abetted the global democratic backsliding. "We need to be aware that [China's] influence is global, and in this sense we share the same destiny that we must defend and safeguard democracy together," he stressed.

National Cheng Kung University political science professor Leung Man-to, who was born in Hong Kong and has lived in Taiwan for seventeen years, said when facing the Chinese Communist Party, "there is only one kind of attitude, which is that you have to distrust it and then distrust it." Beijing's control over Hong Kong is through media and the economy, he said, adding "1.3 million people in Hong Kong now live below poverty line; that is one seventh of the Hong Kong population." "Beijing only cares about maintaining the city's financial freedom so that [the Chinese elites] could undertake money-laundry and profiteering activities," Leung said.

"Beijing is also good at polarizing people, making your fellow people either your friends or enemies. This is what it has been applying to Taiwan too, using many controversial issues to manufacture serious divides," he added.

Hong Kong's Alliance for True Democracy convener Joseph Cheng also called on Taiwanese media to be aware of China's united front tactics and be as objective as possible in their reporting to avoid polarization. New School for Democracy board member Tseng Chien-yuan said Taiwan and Hong Kong face the danger of authoritarian encroachment from the same regime, while Hong Kong's veteran democracy activist Leung Kwok-hung said we need to understand that the influence of China as a new imperial power is global, calling Taiwanese government to be aware of the fact that there would be no political independence if your economy is not so.

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