

Student politics back on the streets

The surge in demonstrations against the Government saw various interest groups gathering around a familiar troupe of activists. Yenni Kwok reports

Suddenly, students seem to have become defiant again. Twice in the past three weeks they have organised controversial protests. Along with mainland protesters, students clashed with police who pepper-sprayed them while on the grounds of the Central Government Offices during a demonstration over the right of abode issue.

Beaten, but unbowed, the Hong Kong Federation of Students organised another rally within days to mark the third anniversary of the handover - this time calling for the Chief Executive's downfall. In both cases, they refused to fully adhere to the law by not applying for permits to hold the rallies.

Though led by a hardcore of just 30 students, the July 1 protest proved to be one of the strongest of many held to mark the anniversary. Scenes of young, educated people expressing anger against the Government dispelled the image held by many of Hong Kong students staying out of politics and isolating themselves on campus with thoughts only for academic honours and lucrative careers.

According to the students' estimates, the July 1 rally drew about 3,700 protesters from different interest groups to march from Causeway Bay to Central. Photographs transmitted around the world showed marchers carrying an effigy of the Chief Executive and chanting "Dump Tung Chee-hwa". Their efforts led thousands of other protesters to join the call for Mr Tung to go.

Even the students themselves were surprised at the turnout, having expected less than half the number. Yuen Hoi-yan, a member of the student federation's standing committee, noted that the police action during the right of abode protest had encouraged others to take part on July 1. "We never expected that police would use excessive force during the June 26 sit-in."

Both protests drew praise from the public. One participant said she thought the marchers were "truly democratic", with students allowing people to take the microphone to air their grievances on July 1.

Another pointed out that students had sided with the most unwelcome group in Hong Kong, the right-of-abode seekers, whose cause had been avoided by most political parties.

But how strong a sign are these two rallies of another rise in activism? Lo Chi-kin, a student activist in the 1970s, believes "students are the agents of change", and cites as examples the rallies in the 70s which put pressure on the Government to tackle corruption and to provide subsidised housing and welfare programmes.

The most evocative rallies took place around the June 4, 1989, Beijing massacre when students not only rallied behind their mainland counterparts who were demanding

change, but also demanded the democratisation of Hong Kong. Yet there are many differences, particularly in the number of participants. Student leaders in 1989-90 could round up thousands of fellow students to take to the streets, swept by anger against Beijing and the troops who violently broke up the protests in Tiananmen Square.

Students have since been portrayed as devoting themselves to studying rather than raising social awareness. Widespread public anger towards Mr Tung three weeks ago could still only draw the same 30 students, mainly executive committee members of university student unions, to both rallies.

While the federation claims 50,000 members, only 100 are active, and "30 people are very, very active", said Ms Yuen and Kaxton Siu Yu-kwan, chief editor of the federation's publishing committee.

Ms Yuen stressed that the students did not seek a high profile. "We try to raise awareness among people. The press may think students are leading the changes in society, but we are not doing it in a conscious way. We just wanted to say something, so we organised the protests."

They said the protests were not to seek attention for themselves, but to get their message across. As with the spontaneous nature of demonstrations, the demand that Mr Tung should go was chanted for the sake of its shock value.

"We did not really want Tung to step down," said Mr Siu. "What we really want is a referendum to change the nomination and election of the Chief Executive and the councils. We want everything to be done by the Hong Kong people, not the mainland government."

Andrew To Kwan-hang, secretary-general of the federation in 1989-90, said the call reminded him of the passion shown by students in support of the Tiananmen activists. But he saw little sign of mass student protests developing in the SAR. "Hong Kong students are never as radical as they are expected to be. People here are pragmatic, they never want to overthrow the Government." But he added: "The actions of Hong Kong students represent the consciousness of our society."

Mr Lo, who worked as a federation council member in the 1970s and is now a public relations consultant, said protests were no longer radical. "You needed more courage to protest in the 1970s when Hong Kong was not yet pluralistic, the Government was still colonial in outlook and the lowest class was still restricted in civil and political rights. Nowadays it is normal to stage a protest. People look at it as their right."

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