

Recap for **After the Election: What Does the Future Hold for Hong Kong?**

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<https://asiasociety.org/texas/events/after-election-what-does-future-hold-hong-kong>

On Thursday, January 23, Asia Society Texas Center hosted a program on the future of Hong Kong following months of sustained protests. Moderator **Chris Tomlinson** of the *Houston Chronicle* spoke with **Dr. Steven Lewis** of Rice University's Baker Institute and **Alejandro Reyes** of the University of Hong Kong's Asia Global Institute regarding the November district elections, Beijing's response, and the role of the U.S.

Professor Reyes has been observing the street action first hand since they began in June 2019. Key aspects of the protests – that they are leaderless, that movement participants stress unity and the need to avoid criticism of each other – have posed challenges for the Hong Kong government in dealing with the demonstrations. The protests, which involve mainly young, educated middle-class people, including many secondary-school students, have endured in large part because activists have built a political narrative that connects their five tangible demands to specific community values and traditions such as freedom, autonomy, the rule of law, the “Lion Rock Spirit” (akin to the American Dream), and the cherished local culture and language. The public sympathy generated by the movement's success in driving this narrative contributed to the results of the November 24 district council elections – an enormous swing of the vote from control by a significant majority of the seats by pro-Beijing parties and independents to a similar majority now held by pro-democracy candidates.

Reyes cautioned against believing everything in the news about the demonstrations, including protester estimates that 70-80% of the city supported the protests despite the mounting violence, noting that private polling indicated a more realistic figure of 42% of Hong Kong's population in favor even with the frequent clashes between police and protesters.

Socioeconomic issues are often framed as the main cause for the protests, but the movement has also been driven by concerns about Hong Kong's identity and threats to the way of life of Hong Kong people, the two panelists agreed. Though fears of displacement and loss of opportunity have grown due to an increasing number of mainland Chinese moving into Hong Kong for education or employment, Dr. Lewis also pointed out that the protests span a broader cross-section of society and include religious groups, which is an indication of concerns about the future of democratic freedoms in the city.

One response by Beijing to the district election results has been to replace abruptly the head of the mainland liaison office in Hong Kong in early January. Recently, in the Legislative Council, Chief Executive Carrie Lam indicated that the "one country, two systems" policy – which affords Hong Kong's financial and legal systems a high degree of autonomy from mainland China – would continue beyond 2047, when the guarantee of Hong Kong's system remaining unchanged is set to expire. Dr. Lewis believes this has been a retooling of the government's Hong Kong policy.

In response to the ongoing protests, the U.S. Congress passed and President Trump signed into law the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which requires the State Department to issue an annual evaluation of Hong Kong's autonomy from the mainland. A negative assessment could lead to Washington withdrawing recognition of Hong Kong's special status as a jurisdiction separate from the People's Republic of China. If that were to happen, Professor Reyes expressed concern that this would limit or even end important security and intelligence cooperation between the U.S. and Hong Kong (e.g. the pre-clearance of containers being shipped to American ports) and curtail cooperation between U.S. and Hong Kong universities. This would do more harm than help Hong Kong people and would lead to diminished opportunities for Hong Kong's youth. Meanwhile, Dr. Lewis highlighted the role of Hong Kong in the U.S.-China tit-for-tat trade war, and the importance Hong Kong continues to play in China's growth.

Currently, Hong Kong is facing a potential economic recession driven in part by the fall of retail sales and tourism due to months of demonstrations. While Carrie Lam remains Chief Executive, there have been rumors that she will soon be replaced, though she has received public support from Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Reyes noted that Legislative Council elections are scheduled for the fall. The now-routine protests could well continue for many more months.