What They's Talking about on the Streets in Hong Kong

written by Ruixue Bai | October 9, 2014

After Sunday night, when many people feared that there might be a crackdown on the protests after following several pleas for protesters to leave the sites and the government's warning that civil servants must be able to return to work the next day, this week the protests have nevertheless continued. While the numbers taking part have fallen – unlike last week, this week is a regular working week – many of the protesters still remain very determined. Talks between the Students' Federation and the government which had been scheduled for Friday were canceled by the government. Meanwhile pro-Beijing groups have continued to try to disrupt the protesters, although not on the same scale as last Friday.

Last night I was in Mong Kok and joined one of many of the discussion groups that have been taking place at the protest sites. Participants in this discussion were concerned with the movement's goals and how best to achieve them in light of the current situation. The discussion is worth commenting on as the majority of participants were ordinary working people of different generations, (instead of students) as well as a few local activists, who had initiated the discussion. Previously working class and lower middle class people in Hong Kong have tended to be more politically apathetic and this is only something that has begun to change recently, beginning first amongst the young people. What started as a small group discussion, last night, quickly drew in a bigger crowd of participants with those passing by also stopping to give their views.

When I first arrived, the issue of which protest sites should be maintained was being discussed. It was commented that while the site in Causeway Bay, was significantly shrinking and may be difficult to maintain, there were many people keen to keep the site in Mong Kok. One person commented on how the Mong Kok protest was like a following river, and that even if there were those who wanted to call for a retreat to Admiralty, it would have little impact as people would keep coming back here anyway. One participant then raised the issue of what sort of impact would this have on the small businesses and the self-employed in Mong Kok, while a passerby stopped to criticize the traffic disruption caused by the protests.

Someone then asked whether it was really possible to sustain the protests for 30 or 60 days and this soon led on to the more important question of how long the movement should go on for and when should the protests end. On this question there was a lot of debate about what should be achieved before the protesters withdraw. One man commented on how while it was necessary to be tactically flexible in negotiations, principles should never be sacrificed. He believed that while our goal is universal suffrage, we also want regime change and do not just want another CY Leung as Chief Executive.

Another participant expressed his opinion that the movement reminds him of the HKTV protests, where thousands of people came out, and then it just died down. He believes that this only encouraged the government to be more offensive and was therefore concerned that if the protesters retreat now, without winning again concessions, the government will only attack more ferociously next time.

Several argued that we should only leave the streets when we get real universal suffrage, while others disagreed and argued that this was a war to be won in stages. It was argued that it was

important to assess whether the movement is expanding or not and that it didn't mean giving up if we were not occupying this or that street. Despite the different views, however, there seemed to be agreement that regardless of whatever happens it is important not to give up principles and to remember the goal of universal suffrage and civic nominations.

In the discussion, some also turned their attention to how far the students could represent them. One man commented that while the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism did not represent us, it is still important to give support to them now as they are a medium between us and the government. He thought that it was important that the HKFS should come out to brief people during the negotiations. Someone also commented that the HKFS does not have the power to tell protesters what to do in the streets, while another also warned that if the students did enter into negotiations depending on the results there would be the danger that they would lose credibility among the people. The question of whether it would be possible to give the students some type of mandate was also raised, although nobody seemed sure exactly how it would be possible to do this.

On the issue of the negotiations, someone commented that they are just symbolic and it might be the best result if they break down. Others were concerned that they would just be manipulated by the government. One participant commented that they felt pessimistic that the government was not making any concessions, while HKFS seemed to be. Another person expressed the view that we are just at the beginning of the movement and do not actually want a result right now.

Criticism of the pan-democrats was also a topic of discussion. One woman commented on how the Legislative Council does not have the mandate of the people, including the pan-democrat councilors and then went on to criticize how when the protesters were attacked with teargas, some of the pan-democrats did nothing and just folded their arms. "Why should we re-elect them?" she asked. Another participant observed how the pan-democrats never consult the ordinary people. Meanwhile one person was critical of how some pan-democrats have said that it is alright if we lose the movement now as the seed of democracy has already been sown. He went on to argue that you only have to look at China after the crackdown 25 years ago to see that an entirely different seed has been sown. He also said that after so many people have sacrificed so much it is not alright for the pan-democrats to simply tell them to go home.

The discussion session concluded with a well-received speech by a long time political activist who commented on the challenges made to the protesters by pro-Beijing groups when they say that everything that Hong Kong people enjoy comes from China. His response to this challenge was that actually our rice does not come from the Communist Party but from the peasants, while consumer goods are produced by the workers. Even the natural water is only polluted by the Communist Party. He also commented on concerns about the divisions in society, and said that while any division between people who were born in Hong Kong and people who have migrated here is entirely unnecessary, the split between the crony tycoons and the ordinary people is a necessary division and that the more this grows the better until it grows to such an extent that the people will take over.