

FORTUNE

As Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution folds, what's next for Asia's World City?

by Clay Chandler @claychandler DECEMBER 3, 2014, 4:49 PM EST



A pro-democracy demonstrator in front of a police line near the Hong Kong government headquarters. While protests have ended, Jimmy Lai hasn't curbed his pro-democracy campaign.

Photo by Aaron Tam — AFP/Getty Images

As the final barricades come down, party leaders in Beijing may decide they'd just as soon have a city that's a little less worldly — and a lot more Chinese.

Not with a tank, but with a truncheon — that's how Hong Kong's pro-democracy demonstrations are ending after a seven-week standoff with the local government.

In September, when Hong Kong's police fired tear gas on unarmed protestors, injuring more than 70, China watchers in the West conjured the specter of a Tiananmen-style "crackdown." Many predicted China's president Xi Jinping would dispatch People's Liberation Army troops to clear demonstrators from the streets of this former British colony.

That didn't happen. Instead, Beijing has played a waiting game, countering a mostly

student-led movement to “occupy” central Hong Kong “with peace and love” with an almost entirely police-led war of patience and attrition.

After the tear gas incident, Hong Kong officials — closely supervised by overseers in Beijing — pulled back, calculating that eventually protest fatigue would settle over the city. Now that bet is paying off.

Last week, with a high-profile summit in Beijing for Asia Pacific leaders safely concluded, and polls showing that a majority of Hong Kong residents think the protests have dragged on for too long, Hong Kong police began clearing the encampments block-by-block. With billy clubs, pepper spray and wire cutters, they pushed back protestors, pulled down tents and removed barricades, clearing the Mong Kok district in Kowloon and rolling back all but a tiny remnant of the demonstrators at Admiralty and Causeway Bay.

There were nasty confrontations and dozens of arrests. But police stopped short of the get-tough measures that triggered backlash in September. It didn't hurt that as Hong Kong police closed in, U.S. outrage over the grand jury verdict in a police brutality case in Ferguson, Mo., dominated global headlines.

By Wednesday, a protest movement that at its height drew more than a hundred thousand angry Hong Kongers into the streets to chant anti-government slogans, seemed to have run its course. Three high-profile founders of the “occupy” movement — professors Benny Tai and Chan Kin-man, and the Reverend Chu Yiu-ming — presented themselves for arrest at Hong Kong's central police station. They said their surrender was meant to send a message to the student protestors who have been the driving force behind the demonstrations that the time has come to retreat.

“Our young people have used their bodies to withstand the blows of police batons, their blood and broken bones have brought the deepest sorrow,” Tai said in an open letter to other protestors. “For the sake of the occupiers' safety, we three urge the students to retreat.” Police refused to arrest the three men and released them without charge.

Joshua Wong, the movement's most prominent student leader vowed to battle on. At the Admiralty protest site Wong announced that he and others would stage a hunger strike in an effort to force the government to heed demands for broader representation in elections for Hong Kong's chief executive.

But Alex Chow, the head of Hong Kong's Federation of Students, seemed more resigned, telling media that it was “only a matter of time” before student leaders would have to surrender too. Students, he acknowledged, had “underestimated the strength of [the government's] political power.”

It's unclear how authorities will deal with the movement's last holdouts. Perhaps it no longer matters. At the Admiralty site, hundreds of protestors are still hunkered down in tents. The “democracy wall,” made of brightly colored Post-It Notes, banners vilifying

Hong Kong chief executive C.Y. Leung, and many other symbols of the “Umbrella Revolution,” remain. But in its diminished state, the Admiralty camp has become more of nuisance than genuine threat.

The broader question is how Beijing intends to govern Hong Kong now that order has restored.

In one sense, Hong Kong’s mainland overseers emerged as victors from the turbulence of the last two months; they reasserted central government authority over Hong Kong without yielding to demands for a more democratic electoral process. But, if nothing else, the protests highlighted Hong Kong residents’ growing disaffection with the coterie of local tycoons Beijing has relied on to manage this city since it was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Can Beijing count on those tycoons in years to come?

In the aftermath of the protests, Xi and his compatriots may conclude trying to govern Hong Kong with too firm a hand is counterproductive. What seems more likely is that they will see Hong Kong as an errant and ungrateful child in need of closer supervision.

closer supervision.

Already there is talk of a witch-hunt for protesters. The South China Morning Post reports police have compiled a list of more than 200 people who could be investigated for resisting officers, or for encouraging others to commit illegal acts in the protests. Many fear Beijing will seek to discourage future protests by curtailing press freedom, censoring the Internet or rewriting school curricula to inculcate Hong Kong students with a greater sense of “patriotism.” Beijing’s attempt to portray protesters as pawns of foreign “agents of influence” has left many expatriate residents feeling unwelcome.

Such moves would risk undermining the government’s multi-million dollar global branding campaign, which touts Hong Kong as “Asia’s World City.” But as the final barricades come down, party leaders in Beijing may decide they’d just as soon have a city that’s a little less worldly — and a lot more Chinese.

Clay Chandler is a Hong Kong-based writer, editor and former McKinsey consultant with two decades of experience living and working in Asia. He is also a former Fortune Asia Editor.