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THE SIGHTS AND THE SOUNDS

read for democracy in H.K.

A chance for Britain to be

by Bernard Fong

really Great

DEMOCRACY is the ideal form of government. Most liberal Western thinkers believe democracy, despite its inherent flaws, is at the pinnacle of political evolution since the enlightened populace invariably chooses it over any other system, given a free choice.

But it is precisely this absence of a free choice that democracy has not flourished here and in many other advanced societies.

Certain interest groups which deny the people this free choice often argue that the public is not yet ready or responsible enough to govern.

From Chile to Pakistan, the Philippines to Poland, authorities are repressing this quest for democracy on the same worn pretext.

When, it must be asked, is the time ripe for democracy? Who is the time keeper and arbiter to determine if and when democracy should be granted?

Hongkong, a colonial society, faces the same set of questions and is getting the same standard replies — not yet.

Inviolable rights

A Hongkong citizen has certain inviolable rights guarded by the British laws. Local lawyers, vexed by the vagaries ahead, have routinely warned against the sacrifice of British jurisprudence when the colony is returned to the motherland. Yet these same lawyers, while ardently speaking out for a justice system spawned in a democracy, have not sought the very basis for such an elaborate rules and decrees.

Despite all its surface grandeur, the Hongkong jurisprudence is faulty because democracy eludes the people and because many of the judges, though schooled in the details of law, are not native, and are, therefore, insentient to grassroot feelings.

Justice is best administered by those who are not only educated in the technicalities of law but also experienced in the local life.

For a long time a silence reigns in Hongkong with the majority too busy making a living to question the contradictions in their society. This amounts to the abdication of responsibility, which is excuse enough for some to deny others of the fundamental right of self-government.

But, with the future thrusts upon a cynical public too innured by the pressures of life to express any serious will towards democracy, more and more individuals are beginning to reflect and to ask — why and when.

No one has given the Hongkong students much thought since it has been assumed they are only interested in getting careers and raising families. A colonial education, so it is believed, stifles creative political thinking.

The intelligentsia has always been the vanguard of democratic movements around the world — in Chile, Pakistan, Poland, the Philippines, and others. But here the intellectuals seem preoccupied with joining the establishment than to defy its concepts, believing the sanctity of the touted P and S (prosperity and stability) must never, never be jeopardised.

For too long any argument for democracy has been casually dismissed as a threat against P and S — “don’t rock the boat”, “don’t harm the status quo”, blah, blah, blah — all the while oblivious of the fact that democracy is an integral part of economic wellbeing. Japan, the United States and West Germany are countries with more P and S than Hongkong does, and it is no irony that they should be democratic societies replete with welfare born of compassion and compelling logic.

And it is not surprising, too, that societies with scarce P and S should be governed by bureaucrats and juntas — Poland, Pakistan

and others whose tribulations are grist for the press.

The Hongkong students’ open letter has stunned a lot of people with vested interest against self-government. Indeed the epistle treatise has elicited snipe remarks from the other English daily — which in itself is a testimony of government antipathy to the idea of democracy for Hongkong.

The people who are against democratic rights for Hongkong are the ones who are, by definition, against Hongkong and progress. For a tyrant to frustrate the advance of democracy is bad enough. For a democracy — Britain — to do it, it is shame, shame. To say Britons deserve the right to have a direct role in government and to say the opposite for Hongkong can only be construed as implicitly racist.

Margaret Thatcher said a year ago she had a “moral responsibility” for the people of Hongkong. Who these “people” she was referring to are obvious. If she insists even today that she has a moral responsibility for *all* the people of Hongkong and not just the selected few — the ones in UMEICO, LEGCO, the tycoons and the civil servants — then what is the best way of proving her sincerity than to begin granting the public a democracy modelled after the British Parliament, full citizenship for all Hongkongers on the same basis as that given the Falklanders, and sensible negotiation tactics to ensure a smooth transition from British to Chinese sovereignty?

No one here wants the P and S undermined. People here and everywhere like to have an abundance of goods (absent in a stringent communist state), freedom of expression and of movement. To desire these does not mean the love of the status quo because the present is far, far from ideal since the roads are congested which hampers the freedom of movement; since the civil service has a monopoly on government which contradicts the freedom of expression, and since currency and land speculation is rife in Hongkong which makes expensive — if not for the generosity of China — the goods which are so abundant.

The Hongkong students wish to have the government definition of status quo clarified since it does not mean the same to the public as it does to the millionaires. When Maria Tam queried the people whether they wanted the status quo, they replied a resounding “yes”. But did she spell out what exactly was meant by status quo, the tritest phrase in the Hongkong vocabulary? If she did not, then she had indeed rigged the answers because semantics are sensitive.

What the Hongkong students stress in the letter — and what Elsie Elliot has often expressed — is that this popular quest for the vaunted status quo really means to the majority is this: “We, the people want the good capitalist life, and if the communists won’t tamper with it and yet guarantee us self-government under Chinese sovereignty, then we are happy.”

Intelligent people

For, as another Standard correspondent Lionel Houghton says in a letter: “What do the people of Hongkong want in the way of a government? The application of simple logic will answer this question. They want what any self-respecting, self-reliant and intelligent people would want. Be for and of the people. Be absolutely and uncompromisingly accountable to the people. Irrespective of what form a government takes, accountability is the cornerstone of good government.

“Never again allow a handful of Englishmen who purport to represent the interest of five million Chinese citizens, to negotiate with another handful of Englishmen...”

No, his are not subversive sentiments but feelings of the silent majority on whose behalf Maria Tam and Selina Chow and their ilk are so anxious to represent, by default.

The first Hongkong barrier against democracy is in the present government itself which seems content on allowing limited — and almost farcical — self-representation at the district board level. But democracy is an absolute — it is either this is or this is not a democratic society. A “democracy” of the Afrikaan variety which lets five million whites dominate 35 million blacks and coloureds is tyranny in the guise of privileges for some and none for the majority.

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The second barrier against local democracy is none other than the elite of appointed officials — in Legco and Umelco — who, the students say, “monopolise the decision-making power while the structure (they uphold) assures no public accountability.”

They also say “we believe that it is important for any government to act on ‘general interest’ and not to be manipulated by any particular group in the name of ‘all people’ ”.

Time has come for the British not only to concede to the inevitable but to enhance their legacy in Hongkong. There is no other gift more precious than to have the British grant Hongkong, in these next 14 years, a parliamentary democracy fashioned after their own tested one. To achieve such an exalted feat would once and for all erase all the past bitterness and mistakes and to raise the British esteem as a farsighted people.

The British have extracted much from Hongkong and other colonies, often leaving behind confusion and enmity. Indeed Western liberal historians have traced present crises to the colonial order — the Middle East, the Falklands, Cypress, the sectarian strife in the Indian subcontinent and denigration of Amerindians and Australian aborigines. What is the best way to rectify the wrongs but by giving Hongkong a foundation for a lasting democracy with a house of lords in which to retire the Legco and Umelco retainers and a house of commons for those elected to serve?

The students aver “We do not think that our economic advancement can outweigh our political backwardness...”

Glaring paradoxes

This is one of the most glaring paradoxes in Hongkong, a society yet at once so sophisticated as to baffle even the jaded West and also so entrenched in dated colonialism, with pith helmeted Kiplingesque superannuation coexisting with space age computer technology.

Hongkong is a chance for Britain to redeem itself and to spread, as it had seldom spread in the past, its most prized piece of heritage — democracy.

An editorial in the other paper excuses the democratic lapse in Hongkong by citing Sir Mark Young who had thought of giving the franchise to the local people after the Japanese occupation, only to rescind the notion during the communist revolution in the mainland. The contention is, of course, as any intelligent person would agree, fatuous, since the peasant revolution in the north alone made democratisation here urgent; for what is the best proof for the superiority of the West than to herald democracy for a society in a time of encroaching crisis?

The government and the Umelco and Legco coterie have frequently criticised Chinese bunglings and sought guarantees for the maintenance of the, sigh, status quo. But guarantees are, as always, mere words. Can the British government guarantee full employment for its people? Can Legco and Umelco guarantee that public needs and feelings will always be respected in the present legislative process by decree and charade? Of course not. China does not owe Britain any promises, except the promise to its people and its Third World allies that it would, in time, take Hongkong back. For what have Britain and the Umelco and Legco done to deserve Chinese pledges when China has never recognised the validity of the unequal treaties?

As Lionel Houghton describes in his letter, any society — however backward — aspires to rule itself. Hongkong has matured to a stage where the time for democracy is ripe. The Hongkong students, despite the constraints of a colonial education, have now stated their views for democracy under the British aegis. This proves the educated youth are not all obsessed by pursuing material wealth while ignoring their intuitive desire for means of governing their own society. This is a laudable political awakening, one which would surely be hailed by the enlightened in any sympathetic place — especially Britain.

The British should be flattered for the expression of the intellectuals’ will to emulate their democratic system — which, as the British industrial might continues to decline, may be the most cherished British export of all.