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Adding direct action to grass roots politics

IN the Hongkong context, their actions verge on radical. Open challenges to the laws on assembly, shouted protests in a courtroom, rallies held to compete with those organised by mainstream liberals.

The April 5th Action Group burst on to the local political scene this year and jolted Hongkong out of preconceived notions of what grass roots politics was all about.

The climax came in a magistrates' court this week when seven members of the group were cleared of unlawful assembly charges. In the high-profile case, the court heard charges arising out of the September 29 demonstration by the group outside a Causeway Bay restaurant, where guests were celebrating the 40th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

The story is certain to continue. Following their acquittal, the group's members are now planning civil action. One of the seven, Raymond Lau Wing-kam, claims to have suffered permanent damage to an eye in the incident.

In most Western democracies, the group would be regarded for what it is: a small collection of activists who are skilled in the practice of direct action politics. Say it loud and in a way that must be noted by the media.

But in Hongkong, used to tame political groups on the left which were usually little more than discussion groups, they were new, different and challenging.

The prosecution of the group turned into a *cause celebre*, initially because of the vigour of the police investigation. There was the infamous raid to seize news video tape from a TV station, ensuring plenty of outcry from civil libertarians over press freedoms.

Then came the letter from the Political Adviser, William Ehrman, to the New China News Agency, in which he cited the prosecution when spelling out Hongkong's position on ac-

THE April 5th Action Group can only be encouraged by the recent court decision exonerating seven of its members as this small group continues to make an impact out of all proportion to its size, writes SHANE GREEN.

tivities which China might see as subversive.

All of it resulted in the April 5th Action Group getting the kind of publicity that money can't buy.

The head of Hongkong University's Law Department, Dr Raymond Wacks, says the 40th anniversary protest, which saw some demonstrators trying to break through a police cordon, was bound to attract attention.

"Obviously, the number of times we have demonstrations, particularly of that kind, is very small," he says.

Dr Wacks is among those concerned about the political overtones of the trial, pointing to the "disturbing connection" of the prosecution with the suggested needs of the Chinese Government.

"That to me is a very worrying feature of the whole case," he says. "It did take place in the context of this delicate, tense relationship between Hongkong and China. And I suppose that distinguishes it from almost everything else we've seen in Hongkong."

The group had its beginnings late last year, and was initially formed over the human rights issue of closed centres being used to house Vietnamese boat people.

Early this year, it began calling itself the April 5th Action Group and took up the cause of political prisoners on the mainland, organising a signature campaign on their behalf.

Two of its members were in the delegation which attempted to take petitions with more than 24,000 signatures to Beijing, only to have them seized by Chinese customs officials.

The dawning of the Beijing Spring saw the group at

the forefront of action, holding a 100-day sit in at the Star Ferry.

That protest also laid the financial foundations for the group's activities this year. According to Raymond Lau, one of April 5th's leaders, about \$280,000 was collected for the group itself, while about \$900,000 was received for students on the mainland.

Mr Lau, a teacher, says the \$280,000 has been spent on leaflets and other publications, banners and legal costs. A legal bill of about \$150,000 is still outstanding.

OF the money collected for the students, Mr Lau says about \$350,000 is left.

Asked whether funds for the students would be audited, he says this had been considered, but the group had instead decided to publish accounts. Certain monies, he says, could not be audited. Mr Lau says the group had been involved in helping dissidents flee China.

"Obviously, even if there is an accountant willing to audit it, those sums of money won't have any receipts," he says.

The group puts its membership at between 60 and 70, from intellectuals to factory workers. Mr Lau sums up the group politically as having "socialist inclinations".

Early this year, he says the group saw the indications of a mass movement in the making. "That's why we thought it was the correct tactic to go directly to the masses."

The group is definitely seen as being on the radical edge of the liberal movement, but Mr Lau doesn't agree.

"I don't like the word radical. We want to play the

role of an avant-garde for the providing of political leadership.

"Of course, the price of that is that it gives people the image of being radical."

Mr Lau says that within the group, he personally argues against action designed to attract publicity.

"The reason why people have that opinion is that we are the first group to support the students in China in action," he says.

"At that time, when we were the first to come out, people would say that was a political stunt. That was radical. But then members of the public caught up with us, then we were no longer radical."

Lau Kin-chi, a Lingnan College lecturer who was a member of the petition delegation to Beijing in March, left the group over differences on the question of tactics.

"I thought that, after June, if you look at the objective situation in Hongkong, people would still be supporting democracy movement in China," says Ms Lau. "It was not that necessary to try to express your support by going to demonstrations."

Miss Lau says that, before April, it was necessary to arouse concern through action like demonstrations or concerts. She says she now favours "more educative" means to sustain concern and effort.

While its tactics are more extreme than other members of the liberal lobby, April 5th is still a member of the Hongkong Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China.

A leader of the alliance, Lee Wing-tat, says April 5th has a "very sharp or distinct" ideology. "But we can accept all of this, because we have the same common goal in that we support the democratic patriotic movement in China," he says.

The future for April 5th seems certain to be high profile, especially if the civil cases proceed.