

“UMBRELLA MOVEMENT” APPROACHES TURNING POINT IN HONG KONG

In the early hours of Wednesday November 19, a group of masked protesters attempted to penetrate inside Hong Kong’s Legislative Council (LegCo) following rumors about the impending vote on the proposed “Article 23” on Internet freedom.

The assailants used many objects, including metal barriers, to shatter the glass doors at LegCo’s northern entrance, provoking a large-scale intervention by anti-riot police. The stand-off persisted for several hours, ending with the arrest of several people, most of whom were teenagers. According to local media, the situation returned to normal on Wednesday morning, with only a light security cordon ensuring the protection of the parliamentary complex.

These incidents drew a large number of political comments in the special administrative region, as it is the first time that the “Umbrella movement” has degenerated into such violence. It must be noted that the main leader of the “Occupy Central” movement, as well as lawmakers belonging to the “pan-democratic” camp, have unreservedly condemned the action, worrying about its negative impact on the entire movement. Indeed, many fear that such irruption of political violence would provide pretext for more stringent security measures in the near future, including a plan to build a three-meter high metal fence around the LegCo.

The latest developments in Hong Kong suggest that the pro-democracy leaders will very shortly be forced to determine the follow-up of their movement, as the protest sit-ins enter their eighth week. Earlier this week, the peaceful clearing of barricades set up in front of Admiralty district’s Citic Tower had given the impression that protesters would comply with court injunctions and would even cooperate with security forces “if no violence is used” by members of the “bailiffs” office. Indeed, this came to pass as up to 1.8 million people have signed a petition asking for a quick end of the streets’ occupation and for the return to normality.

However, the Legco incident raises fears that further clearance operations, which have been planned in Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, could be conducted in a far less peaceful manner.

While the High Court's Justice Thomas Au Hing-cheung stated that a he would take a decision "as soon as possible" on further clearance applications made by bus companies, the secretary general of the Federation of Students, Alex Chow Yong-kang, warned that members of his organization would not leave the protest sites unless they are arrested.

On the contrary, an increasing number of activists and sympathizers are rejecting this maximalist position and are openly raising the question of the peaceful end of the movement, considering that the students already achieved to raise worldwide attention on the universal suffrage issue and on the need for more democracy in Hong Kong.

Therefore, in the days to come, it will be essential to monitor if both the government and the student leaders will be able to avoid further outbursts of violence. The potential confrontations that could erupt during clearance operation could favor a much greater mobilization and trigger more street protests in the future.

If further protests were to occur, it cannot be excluded that another occupation movement could begin soon and prevent the city from resuming a normal life. In the worst case scenario, a lasting rupture within the pro-democracy camp might even lead to more violent confrontations. The radicalization of some students could indeed introduce a durable split among activists regarding the non-violence principle, thereby leading the movement toward a point of no return.

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