News



Anti-government protesters attend the "Lest We Forget" rally in Hong Kong Dec. 1, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Marko Djurica)



by Peter Feuerherd

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January 6, 2020

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"There's something happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear."

A different time. A different culture. But Buffalo Springfield's ode to 1960s American protestors might very well be applied to the events transfixing the world in Hong Kong.

"Everybody is watching this," China expert and Passionist Fr. Rob Carbonneau told NCR a few days before hundreds of thousands once again took to the streets of Hong Kong to assert pro-democracy views, this time over the Christmas holidays.

American protestors in the '60s relied on television news to spread the message, with the slogan "the whole world is watching." Hong Kong protestors today are instantaneously showing the world via social media, as many observers see an uneasy standoff.

"The people fear the government. The government fears Hong Kong," said a native of Hong Kong, now living in New Jersey, who didn't want his name revealed because he did not want to be quoted about the controversy, which has sparked divisions among those with connections to the city.

Hong Kong, with its long tradition of capitalism and democratic rights imported from its former British colonists, is different from the rest of China. It is those differences that are now a point of contention, noted Carbonneau, the holder of a doctorate in American and East Asian history from Georgetown University, now teaching at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania.

The roots of the current conflict began in 1997, when the British government handed over control of the then-colony to China. The Chinese government left Hong Kong with a degree of autonomy, hoping that its international financial connections could assist the development of the mainland if largely left alone.

The goal, as the Chinese government then described it, was "one country, two systems." But the emergence of China as an economic superpower has tested that relationship.

A proposed extradition bill, which would have allowed suspects to be sent to the mainland, sparked the protests last year, as hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong citizens saw it as an attempt to circumvent the city's tradition of respect for law and as overly deferential to the mainland government.



Cardinal John Tong Hon, the retired bishop of Hong Kong (CNS/Francis Wong)

One of the demands of the protestors is for direct elections for the Hong Kong government, in contrast to the current complicated system dominated by pro-Beijing elements in Hong Kong.

As part of a worldwide church and with a small but significant presence in the city, at 5% of the total population of more than 7 million, Hong Kong Catholics are right in

the middle of it.

Cardinal John Tong Hon, the 80-year-old leader of the church in Hong Kong, acknowledged the crisis in his annual Christmas letter, stating that the protests over the extradition bill, proposed by the Hong Kong government last June, "have led to a socio-political turmoil that has rocked Hong Kong over the past six months."

"The conflicting views of the government and the protesters, and those of other people, have torn our society apart, and many people have suffered from distressing traumas, psychologically or emotionally," he wrote.

Tong, who was named apostolic administrator for the Hong Kong diocese by Pope Francis after the death last year of Hong Kong Bishop Michael Yeung, is seen in a caretaker role. Tong previously led the diocese from 2009 to 2017.

He urged the Hong Kong government to listen and conduct inquiries into violent incidences between the police and demonstrators.

"Only when the truth is made known can the basis of mutual trust between the government and the people be re-established. It is then that we can pave the way for a dialogue of reconciliation," he wrote.

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Catholics in Hong Kong who have taken the side of the protesters, along with sympathetic emigres in the United States, agreed that the church should promote peaceful solutions. But some argue that church leadership has not been out front as much as it could be.

Some pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong expressed disappointment that Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Ha Chi-shing has not been named to lead the diocese. Ha, 60, has a reputation for outspoken advocate for democracy.

Ha, Hong Kong protestor Louisa Chow told NCR via an email, "has shown care about the youth and demonstrators based on justice and human rights, conscience and love. He urges people to show our conscience and have wisdom to make decisions. He has led people to march for peace and pray for Hong Kong. He does not agree with violence, but pays sympathy to the youth."

Anna Cheung, a microbiology professor at Manhattanville College in New York, noted that Hong Kong is a connecting point between the West and China. That unique status has played a role in keeping the Chinese government from cracking down on the demonstrators.

Hong Kong, she said, "is like a little golden egg," a place for Chinese oligarchs to do business away from the strictures of the mainland. Because Hong Kong has a long tradition of British law and respect for capitalism, the Chinese government has been able to use its location to expand the mainland's economy. That is a major reason, she said, why the mainland government has yet to fully crack down on the demonstrators.

The Hong Kong emigre previously quoted now living in New Jersey, said that the church is divided, much like the rest of Hong Kong. While most support what is known as the democracy movement — democracy advocates took 87 percent of the vote in elections late last year — there is considerable debate about how far the demonstrators should go. There have been occasional outbursts of violence, which some demonstrators attribute to government provocateurs.

Both Cheung and the emigre in New Jersey said Catholic Hong Kong citizens living in the United States are watching events closely, with most supportive of the democracy movement.

Hong Kong Catholics interviewed by NCR expressed admiration for Pope Francis yet are concerned that he is not getting the full story about their plight. They say he is walking a careful tightrope, along the tentative agreement with the Chinese government reached in 2018 that would allow the church to assert more authority over its internal governance on the mainland.



People carry a cross during a march to protest against the extradition bill in Hong Kong July 17, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Tyrone Siu)

"We believe that Francis does not have a thorough understanding of what the Chinese government is doing with Hong Kong," said Cheung. "The Holy Father needs to push harder."

But the church in Hong Kong operates with understandable caution, said Carbonneau. "They are under the umbrella of the Chinese mainland. They breathe in that environment."

Hong Kong has served as one of the few unifying elements of politics in the United States. The U.S. Congress passed a bipartisan measure sanctioning Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses, with the support of President Donald Trump.

The economics of both the mainland and Hong Kong continue to play a role in the future of the city.

Maryknoll Sr. Betty Ann Maheu, who lives with her religious community in Ossining, New York, worked in Hong Kong for the Holy Spirit Study Center for more than 17 years. While living there, she got the chance to visit the mainland. She saw the development of the economic colossus China has become, with roads transformed from bare pathways to eight-lane highways.

"It was a miracle what China was achieving in development," she said.

When an agreement was reached between the British colonial government and China to hand over authority, the city and the mainland became more strongly linked.

The agreement indicated that the Chinese government would take full control of the bustling city in 50 years. At the time, it seemed a long way off.

"It seemed to everyone that China would become a democratic system, so no one was worried," she said. But while China has embraced a capitalist-style development, its political control rests in authoritarian rule. That inspires fear among Hong Kong citizens, especially the young, who look for a future with freedoms their elders have taken for granted.

The struggle is about more than capitalist development, however. Faith inspires many in Hong Kong. Maheu noted that in the Hong Kong Diocese* it was common to welcome up to 3,000 new converts every Holy Saturday.

At the time, she thought, as the mainland developed economically it would emerge as mirroring the values lived in Hong Kong, a largely safe and prosperous city.

It remains not exactly clear how the continuing Hong Kong protests will end.

"Suddenly, the young people saw warning signs that things could be getting out of hand. The chaos that we see in Hong Kong today is completely uncharacteristic. The future is unsure. The people have had a taste of freedom, and that desire remains deep in their heart," said Maheu in a Christmas message to her friends.

Carbonneau, as an historian, said today's Hong Kong needs to be seen in its full context. The Catholic Church is involved, he said, because there are Catholics both in Hong Kong and on the mainland who are watching the situation carefully.

Always lurking is the fear that the Chinese government might respond like it did during the brutal takedown of the protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 even if, at this point, most see that as unlikely, arguing that the Beijing rulers do not want to kill the golden goose of economic growth that Hong Kong provides.

Whatever happens, said Carbonneau, the Catholic Church is expected to play a role.

"The church is directly affected because the people involved are Catholics," he said. The goal for the church, he said, is to examine "how we got here, how we care, not how we despair."

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**This version has been corrected to note i*t's all the parishes together in Hong Kong that bring up to 3,000, and often more, new converts every Holy Saturday.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 24-Feb 6, 2020** print issue under the headline: Hong Kong Catholics navigate conflict.