



July 1, 1997, when Britain's 156-year rule of Hong Kong ended. Britain tried unsuccessfully to hold elections there in the mid-to-late 1950s. Pool photo by Dylan Martinez

Hong Kong Democracy Standoff, Circa 1960

By ANDREW JACOBS OCT. 27, 2014

BEIJING — It is a common riposte among those who oppose the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong, especially here in mainland China: Where were the champions of universal suffrage during the many decades that Britain denied Hong Kong residents the right to govern themselves?

“In 150 years, the country that now poses as an exemplar of democracy gave our Hong Kong compatriots not one single day of it,” People’s Daily, the official Communist Party newspaper, said in a recent editorial. “Only in the 15 years before the 1997 handover did the British colonial government reveal their ‘secret’ longing to put Hong Kong on the road to democracy.”

But documents recently released by the National Archives in Britain suggest that beginning in the 1950s, the colonial governors who ran Hong Kong repeatedly sought to introduce popular elections but abandoned those efforts in the face of pressure by Communist Party leaders in Beijing.

The documents, part of a batch of typewritten diplomatic dispatches requested by reporters from two Hong Kong newspapers, reveal that Chinese leaders were so opposed to the prospect of a democratic Hong Kong that they threatened to invade should London attempt to change the status quo.

“We shall not hesitate to take positive action to have Hong Kong, Kowloon and New Territories liberated,” Liao Chengzhi, a senior Chinese official in charge of Hong Kong affairs, was reported to have said in 1960, referring to the areas under British administration that would later be

returned to China.

Another document recounts a meeting two years earlier, during which Premier Zhou Enlai told a British military officer that any effort to introduce even a modicum of self-governance to Hong Kong would be viewed as “a very unfriendly act” and a “conspiracy,” one he suggested would be seen as a move to set the colony on a path to independence.

The threats had the desired effect. Britain made little effort to introduce electoral democracy in Hong Kong in the decades that followed.

In addition to confirming that China’s opposition to a democratic Hong Kong began almost a half-century earlier than was commonly known, the documents, coupled with published accounts of former colonial officials, also highlight how China’s vehemence intensified in the early 1980s as the two sides began discussing Hong Kong’s future. Then in the early 1990s, when Chris Patten, the last colonial governor, began aggressively supporting limited elections for the territory, China’s opposition became more openly strident.

In the end, Mr. Patten ignored China’s claims that democracy would beget chaos and gave Hong Kong residents the right to elect 30 members of what was then a 60-member Legislative Council. The move so infuriated Lu Ping, the senior Chinese official then in charge of Hong Kong affairs, that he called Mr. Patten “a man to be condemned through the history of Hong Kong,” according to newspaper accounts at the time.

Today’s critics in Beijing are correct, however, in suggesting that Britain, which took over Hong Kong in 1842, came late to the democracy game. Britain’s democratic impulses in the 1950s came after it had been ejected from India and the country was trying to head off revolts in several colonies. “It was at a time when Britain was introducing democracy in many of its colonies around the world, and the idea was Hong Kong should be treated the same,” said Danny Gittings, an assistant professor of law at the University of Hong Kong.

After the rebuff from China, Britain did not make a concerted push for popular elections until the 1990s, when it was on its way out. Britain hoped

democracy would calm a citizenry anxious about its impending return to Communist China, historians say, and ensure the stability of British investments.

In his public statements at the time, Mr. Patten said he thought Hong Kong residents deserved a role in local governance. “People in Hong Kong are perfectly capable of taking a greater share in managing their own affairs in a way that is responsible, mature, restrained, sensible,” he told reporters in 1992.

It was Mr. Patten’s recent defense of the protesters’ goals that prompted the People’s Daily attack. The newspaper’s editorial acknowledged his role in promoting democracy in the 1990s but said his aim was to create “a not inconsiderable gulf between the mainland and Hong Kong.”

The recent drumbeat of commentaries in the Chinese news media that have sought to shape the historical narrative may have inadvertently strengthened the resolve of many Hong Kong activists, who say such heavy-handed efforts remind them of the political and press freedoms they are fighting for, liberties absent in the rest of China.

“I was personally very stunned that Beijing could unabashedly tell lies in the face of so many Hong Kong people, because Hong Kong people can vividly remember the democracy struggle between the former British government and the Chinese government,” said Ming Sing, a political scientist at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

The Chinese never made good on their threat to invade, in part because they hoped the “one country, two systems” model they eventually adopted for Hong Kong would encourage peaceful reunification with Taiwan, the self-governed island that China claims as its own. China’s leaders also had no interest in disrupting Hong Kong’s wildly successful economy, a vital outlet for foreign trade and hard currency at a time when China was largely isolated from the industrialized world.

“We want to get Hong Kong back in a good state and not in a state of ruin,” is how Mr. Liao put it in the early 1960s.

Despite its apparent qualms about democracy on its doorstep, in 1990,

China committed to the aim of electing Hong Kong's leader by universal suffrage after it regained sovereignty. "How Hong Kong develops democracy in the future is a matter entirely within the sphere of Hong Kong's autonomy, and the central government cannot intervene," People's Daily quoted Lu Ping as saying in 1993.

But in 1997, not long after the handover, China scrapped Mr. Patten's newly introduced legislative elections. Faced with too much democracy, China simply "set up a new kitchen," as Mr. Lu had earlier suggested the Chinese might do.

Since then, however, direct elections have been restored for 35 representatives, besting Mr. Patten's system by five seats. (Another 35 members of the Legislative Council are chosen by professional or special interest groups).

Beijing argues that its promise to allow Hong Kong residents to elect their leader, the chief executive, by universal suffrage starting in 2017 is more democracy than Britain ever offered.

But in August, China issued new rules for the election that would allow a 1,200-member committee, most of them Beijing loyalists, to vet potential candidates.

The system may have more elements of democracy than those under British rule, but it falls short of the unfettered self-determination Hong Kong democrats aspire to.

"Looking back at history, it seems like the Communist Party made promises it never intended to keep, which is why people are so angry," said Ho-Fung Hung, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University who grew up in Hong Kong during the 1980s and '90s.

In the end, the skirmishes over history matter little to those who have been occupying the streets of Hong Kong for more than a month.

Max Tang, 19, a wedding photographer who was camped in a tent outside government headquarters, was a toddler during the handover.

"What Hong Kong people did before the handover does not matter," he said. "This is the first chance I have to express my demand for democracy.

What we want is very simple. We want to choose our own leader.”

Alan Wong contributed reporting from Hong Kong, and Didi Kirsten Tatlow from Beijing. Jess Macy Yu contributed research from Beijing.

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