

Hong Kong's "Election"
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As Chief Secretary Henry Tang's candidacy fades, the oligarchs try to prop him up

A grim-faced Leung Chun-yin stared out of the front page of the *South China Morning Post* Friday morning. The Hong Kong government yesterday confirmed that 10 years ago Leung, one of two leading candidates to become the territory's chief executive, was dropped from a jury panel selecting designs for an arts center hub because of a conflict of interest.

The company involved was disqualified when it was discovered that Leung was an advisor through his firm DTZ Holdings. The 10-year-old incident resurfaced in *East Week* magazine of the Sing Tao News media group. Charles Ho, the chairman of the group, went on television recently to question Leung's credentials for position of chief executive in the territory's upcoming quasi-elections after Leung accused the newspaper of conducting a smear campaign against him. Leung had been a board member of the *Sing Tao News* but resigned after the falling out.

Chief executive race slipping away?

It is starting to look intriguing on how far Hong Kong's property and media oligarchs are willing to go to pave the way to the job of chief executive for the former Chief Secretary for Administration Henry Tang, who was believed to be a shoo-in when he entered the race. He has made a long series of missteps, however, that make him look less than competent.

Sensing that Tang was in trouble, the tycoons closed ranks in December to declare support for his 2012 chief executive bid. The selection by the 1,200-member Election Commission is due on Mar. 25. Hong Kong's third chief executive is scheduled to take office July 1 when the incumbent Donald Tsang's second term expires.

Hong Kong's big-business power brokers seem genuinely panicked about the prospect of Leung becoming the territory's boss. They took time off from their busy schedules to rally for Henry at the Hong Kong Convention & Exhibition Centre before Christmas. Li Ka-shing (chairman, Hutchison Whampoa), Allan Zeman (chairman, Ocean Park and "father of the Lan Kwai Fong entertainment district) and David KP Li (chairman, Bank of East Asia) were some of the territory's icons who endorsed him. David K P Li has also taken on the onerous task of managing Tang's election campaign.

Despite this formidable lineup of oligarchs, Tang has been trailing badly in public opinion polls. The Jan. 16-19 poll by Hong Kong University on a sample of 1,022 respondents recorded 29.7 percent in favor of Tang, 42.9 percent for Leung and 9.1 percent for Albert Ho, chairman of the Democratic Party. That is a gap of 13.2 percent in favor of Leung between the two front runners. It has been a similar story on other polls.

Can Leung get 150 nominations?

Despite his lead in the opinion polls, CY Leung has only about 50 of his pledged candidates in the Election Committee. How he is going to secure the requisite 150 nominations is a moot point. Both Henry Tang and the Democratic camp have in excess of 200 pledged candidates each.

The nomination window opens on Feb. 14 -- Valentine's Day -- and closes on Feb. 29. Tang has avoided a public debate with the other contenders so far. He says he will wait for the official nominations to be tabled before that.

Beijing has not indicated its preference between the two 'approved' candidates. That keeps the party faithful in limbo and anxious. They are trained to wait for the whisper. Leung is widely regarded the preferred choice among hardcore leftists in Hong Kong. They are very comfortable with him.

The Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong is the largest pro-Beijing party in the Legislative Council and has 147 seats on the Election Committee which will select the chief executive. Party chairman Tam Yiu-chung has hinted the party may leave the vote to individual choice as there is no internal consensus to block-vote for either candidate and no pressure from Beijing to do so.

One intriguing option for Leung is to court the Democratic camp to shift their 'surplus' nominations to enable him to meet the 150 threshold. There are hints that feelers have been put out to that end. This poses a Machiavellian opportunity and ideological conflict for both the Democratic camp and CY Leung.

China Defines the Criteria

Director Wang Guangya, who heads the Hong Kong-Macau Affairs Office, reports directly to the State Council, China's cabinet. On a visit to Hong Kong in June 2011 to address the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, Wang listed three criteria for the future chief executive: demonstrated love of China and Hong Kong, competence in governance and "a high degree of acceptance among the general public, who should feel that the person elected is not bad".

That has given added symbolic significance to the public polling activity of the Hong Kong and Baptist Universities. Independent polling and disclosure of public views on government does not sit comfortably with the Communist Party. Even consumer marketing surveys in China have to obtain special permits and be approved by the authorities.

So director Wang's listing of popularity and respect as criteria for the HKSAR chief executive is very progressive thinking for the most important job in Hong Kong - whose 7 million residents are excluded from participation.

Addressing a visiting delegation of Hong Kong university students in Beijing last year, Wang roundly criticized the timidity of the British-trained administration, stating that they "still don't know how to be a boss and how to be a master". He observed that they are now in charge but unable to take bold initiatives.

That was the clearest indication yet that the PRC was unimpressed by either the territory's first chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa or incumbent Donald Tsang, who between them wasted 14 years through lack of effective leadership on an array of issues like public housing, air pollution, social safety net for the poorest and relief for a middle class squeezed by inflation and runaway property prices.

But the trio now standing do not seem to be right either. Candidate Tang looks weak and ineffectual. Candidate Leung scares tycoons and ordinary folk alike. Candidate Albert Ho is unacceptable to Beijing.

Despite running record budget surpluses, the administration seems bereft of problem-solving ideas or the will to shunt the property cartel aside. The collusion between the construction lobby and the administration has created questionable infrastructure schemes to pour more concrete on a third runway, reclaim land from the sea and build long bridges and railway connections to the mainland.

The claimed job-creation effects of these schemes has little relevance for Hong Kong residents. It will only mean more mainland and Third World labor being shipped in. It will certainly enrich the local construction industry and related professional firms.

Vision, leadership and a genuine connect with society is absent and Hong Kong's citizens are fed up. The crying needs of society seem not to excite urgent focus or action. The dramatic and sudden HK\$6,000 handout to every HK resident in the 2011 budget was the high-water-mark of societal thinking in the Donald Tsang administration. It was a gesture copied from the Macau SAR where casino income was cascading into government coffers. Director Wang is right on this count.

Pollsters under fire

Both universities and the professors who supervise the surveys have come under attack from the leftist Chinese language newspapers *Ta Kung Pau*, *Wen Wei Pau* and the English language *China Daily*.

Dr Zhao Xinshu of Baptist University released his survey showing Tang reducing Leung's lead before the full sampling data was processed. It was premature and academically unsound. Dr Zhao quit on 6 Feb, the day the Baptist University released its 12 page investigation report.

The head of Baptist University has resisted further investigations, warning of unleashing "white terror" a loaded reference to the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution. There seems to be serious concern about academic freedoms eroding in HK.

Dr Robert Chung stands his ground against "Cultural Revolution-style" criticism. He has invited the left wing newspapers and other critics to a dialogue to answer any question on his survey methodology. Chung says so far no one from the Liaison Office, the mainland press or the university authorities have contacted him.

Meanwhile, Chung has devised a 'civic referendum' to enable members of the public to indicate their preferred CE candidate on 23 March, two days before the 25 March Election Committee voting. He says eligible voters will be able to access a polling station and

participate online and through mobile phones. He would not seek funding from the university, the HK government or political parties. He hopes the HK\$500,000 needed for this project will come from public donations.

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