

Hong Kong and the Value of a Free Press
Asia Sentinel
February 24, 2012
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The territory's chief executive election goes off the rails as China watches in dismay

Only four months ago Hong Kong's chief executive election looked a neat circus act. Two dancing bears, Henry Tang and CY Leung, enter the ring and begin their routines.

The two check regularly with the ringmaster for approval. A third bear, Albert Ho, untrained but securely chained, is allowed in to add drama. The audience knows the story. The act is predictable but vaguely entertaining, like familiar Cantonese opera. The hero known by all beforehand, will emerge victorious from the noise and distraction.

If not for Hong Kong's raucous, unruly press, the circus would have played to script. It was not to be. The editors took a keen interest in the candidates who wished to rule Hong Kong. They searched their past and present for clues to who they really are, what drives them to seek such power, who is behind them and why.

That obviously has posed several problems for China's leaders, who thought they had set up an elaborate "election" process that would ensure that their 1,200 electors would deliver the leader that Beijing wanted. But a free press, which China abhors, has put paid to the scheme.

Tang: women and wine cellars

The Chinese-language daily Ming Pao first disclosed the illegal construction beneath candidate Tang's twin mansions in Kowloon Tong. Tang was the administration's second-most senior officer when the government initiated a long-overdue clampdown on unauthorized structures to property. Chief executive Donald Tsang asked his team to make sure they were clean on this. Henry apparently decided not to reveal his underground secret.

It now appears Tang may have submitted false building plans for approval, omitting the grand basement complex below his swimming pool. He would have required an architect to sign off on the planning submissions. There is a trail of professional breach of code and trust. It was fraud.

Tang's pattern of response to misdemeanors has been to deny wrongdoing, then fudge the issue and when caught, find a scapegoat, even his wife. Then become contrite, ask for a second chance and promise good behavior, but vote for him please.

Even more serious than his extramarital affairs and illegal construction work was his clumsy attempt to pin the 2003 Harbour Fest fiasco on civil servant Mike Rowse. Tang asked for minutes of meetings to be deleted which were material to any inquiry. The government's internal inquiry in 2004 pinned the blame on Rowse and docked a month of his salary following its disciplinary process. That backfired when Rowse sought a judicial review which found for him in 2008.

Tang chaired the Economic Relaunch Strategy Group set up to revive the economy after the SARS scare in 2003. The Hong Kong government had underwritten HK\$100 million for the Harbor Fest program whose main organizer was the American Chamber of Commerce. That had to be paid out in full when the program overran its HK\$1 billion budget by HK\$13.3 million.

The "Accountability System" which Tung Chee-hwa, the first chief executive, put into place to justify political appointments, was nowhere to be seen as Tang and his boss, Chief Executive Donald Tsang, evaded responsibility.

Tsang junkets with oligarchs

Then, over the weekend, The Sun, a free tabloid of the Oriental Daily Group, caught Tsang wining, dining and luxury yachting with tycoons and mobster bosses in Macau. Tsang staged a homely interview with RTHK for prime-time news channels, portraying himself as a humble civil servant on a much-needed break with friends. He denied being a luxury private plane and yacht junketeer, enjoying the high life with tycoons and gambling godfathers, as the territory's press would have him.

The South China Morning Post front paged drawings of the three floors of Donald's luxury complex in Shenzhen across the border where he says he will retire when his term ends in June. A local architect commenting on the plans in the report, observed that a 300sq ft garden seems to have been added after the building plans were approved by the authorities - which in HK would be regarded an illegal structure.

Independent press a nuisance

Both Tang and Tsang would have dearly loved a situation where media know their place and are afraid of political strongmen, where editors would self-censor or can be fired. Where publishers can be instructed to suppress information. Where newspapers can be licensed and their right to publish cancelled on edict.

There is little else to check the abuse of the oligarchs, their collaborators in government and ideologues eager to turf out class enemies and establish a people's dictatorship.

Hong Kong needs to be wary of the next chief executive resurrecting the discarded Article 23 Security legislation which seeks to curb the freedoms of press, assembly, protest and distribution of information. And of legislators who will rubber stamp it. Once such a bad law is allowed onto the Statutes, it will be near impossible to get rid of it.

More CE hopefuls muddy the waters

Regina Ip, chairwoman of the New People's Party and Tsang Yok-sing, president of the Legislative Council, are now in play for the chief executive's job as well. It is obvious to everybody but himself that Henry Tang is a non-starter. The oligarchs are terrified of CY Leung. Beijing is ambivalent.

Regina Ip was promoter of the Article 23 Security Bill which 500,000 Hong Kong residents marched against in 2003, forcing her resignation as security head. Tsang Yok-sing reacted badly after the June 1989 Tienanmen massacre of students by PLA troops.

He temporarily lost faith in Beijing.

The Hong-Macau Affairs Office, ringmaster of the circus, is stumped. Nominations close Feb. 29 and the 1,200 'small circle' electors have to cast their votes on Mar. 25. Hong Kong may by default get a chief executive not even the power-brokers want.

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