

Hong Kong's New CE Gets Off to a Rocky Start
Asia Sentinel
March 26, 2012
By Our Correspondent

Beijing pulls out the stops to push aside its previously anointed candidate

Leung Chung-ying has been selected as Hong Kong's next Chief Executive by a large margin of the 1,200 mostly elite voters entitled to make the choice – 690 votes compared with 285 for his only real rival Henry Tang, 80 for Democratic Party candidate Albert Ho and a significant 143 absentees and spoiled ballots.

But the circumstances of his win will not make it easy to gain public trust, let alone push through badly needed reforms in the face of vested interests, most publicly represented by the major property-based oligarchs but including groups close to organized crime. As an example of that lukewarm public trust, 56 percent of the voters in a mock poll organized by Robert Chung of the University of Hong Kong turned in blank ballots in a rebuff to all three of the candidates. The mock poll, expected to draw only 50,000 participants, drew more than 220,000.

Leung is an intelligent man who is articulate, appears to have concerns for grass roots issues and conducted himself with dignity throughout the campaign. But nonetheless he owes his victory more to Tang's evident failures and to Beijing's switch of support to him than to his own appeal.

Although always ahead of Tang in popular opinion polls this was largely as a result of Tang's lack achievements as Chief Secretary and the public sense that he was only there as a tool of fellow tycoons. These would not have mattered but for revelations, which he first denied, about an illegal luxury basement at his family home which he then tried to blame on his wife.

Tang's low standing evidently made Beijing shift its position despite apparent threats from tycoons attending recent meetings in Beijing that they might reconsider Hong Kong investment if Leung won and implemented ideas to end their grip on the land and property market.

Beijing's local acolytes, the Liaison Office of the HK & Macau Affairs office and others such as Communist Party mouthpiece Wen Wei Pa, then overdid the pressure to get backing for Leung. In the end the election was marked by protests against Beijing's interference. So Leung, who has never been popularly elected to any post nor ever served in government, now starts his new career being seen as owing his selection more to Beijing (and Tang) than his own abilities or policies.

The election process has also led to the uncovering of government-related sleaze which the public has always assumed but was seldom able to prove. Now it has the example of Tang plus partly substantiated allegations about a Leung conflict of interest issue, evidence of dinners with unsavory types close to organized crime involving both Leung's campaign and the current chief executive Donald Tsang.

Much has come out about ministers receiving benefits from tycoons. These benefits which would be illegal if accepted by civil servants but though most of the recipients,

including Tsang, are former civil servants, as ministers they are not covered by the same rules.

Leung has a lot of housecleaning to do even before he addresses policy issues. The Environment Minister has stayed in his job despite repeatedly lying about actual pollution levels. The Civil Service Minister stayed in her job despite a "grave error of judgment" in allowing the retiring housing director to join New World Development, the most notorious of all the big developers, which already employs the former chief of police, Donald Tsang's brother. The Education Minister was exempted from prosecution despite deliberately failing to demolish an illegal structure at his house. The Financial Secretary has admitted keeping no less than 256 gifts received by him in his official capacity.

Sleaze great and small has been a growth industry. Meanwhile much of the New Territories, the major part of Hong Kong's land area, remains effectively under the mafia-style regime of the Heung Yee Kuk, which purports to represent the interests of indigenous inhabitants.

Although these indigenes are a fraction of the NT population, the Kuk's power over officials – which precedes the 1997 handover -- has led not only to the vast enrichment of some of its leading members but the despoliation of much of the land. When it comes to land use, the government's writ does not run in many areas given over to illegal structures, container parks and used car dumps.

Despite or because of this entrenched illegality, the Kuk's head is a member of the government's Executive Council. He is also publicly backed by the Communist Party's main public proxy in Hong Kong, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong.

Thus it remains to be seen whether Leung is tough enough to face down both the tycoons who do not want any change in land policies which they have long dictated to spineless or venal bureaucrats and the likes of the Kuk with its members' connections both to organized criminality and the DAB. As a leading professional surveyor for three decades, Leung know better than most that any solution to land issues will be at the expense of both tycoon and Kuk power and wealth.

If he can he will show that he is not necessarily the Beijing stooge that makes a large minority suspicious of him. Critics accept that he is intelligent and hard-working and a good communicator. But they suspect that he is an authoritarian by nature – a fear boosted by Tang's claim that he advised use of tear gas during the mass (but very peaceful) demonstrations in 2003 which led to early removal of then chief executive Tung Chee-hwa.

These critics further fear that by vigorously pursuing badly needed policies to address housing issues, combat pollution and reduce income disparities he will buy enough popularity to get away with taking a hard line against significant constitutional reform. For sure there are enough good ideas around and more than enough money to make early moves both on immediate questions troubling the public and on longer term issues such a population policy and the tax system.

So after a pause to win popularity will he press ahead with security legislation under

Article 23 of the Basic Law – legislation abandoned after the 2003 demonstrations – and generally take a nationalistically “patriotic” stance on issues such as education? Already the universities, some of whose heads have seemed more interested in pleasing the government and/or Beijing than protecting academic integrity, have seen instances of facing political pressure – including overtly from the Liaison Office.

For now though, after a contrived “election” which offered a poor choice of candidates and exposed the whole system as encouraging corporate influence-peddling as well as Beijing's interference the pressure for the public will be for the things that Beijing most fears: unpredictable popular elections and transparent government. Leung must also face up to a surge in local identity as contrast to the mainland. Some of this may be contrived, some silly, some selfish. But it exists and will have been further strengthened by the election process.

Two key unknowns remain: what does Leung really believe in and want to achieve? And how good are his connections in Beijing at a time when power there is shifting?

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