

Chinese President Hu Jintao's Hostile Hong Kong Reception
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By Our Correspondent

Tens of thousands take to the streets to deliver rocky beginning for Hong Kong's new Chief Executive

The harder Hong Kong officials try to show mainland leaders how patriotic and happy the city is, the more it angers the inhabitants. The police presence to protect President Hu Jintao, not from harm but from the sight of protesters, was on a scale that might have been expected for President Obama visiting Kabul.

Hu's aides doubtless advised him of events, and he may even have watched some on local television. He may have seen a few hundred protesters clashing with a police barrier, and the temporary arrest of a journalist for endeavoring to ask a question of the president – an arrest spurring anger from the whole journalist fraternity.

Hu may not even have been surprised with the July 1 march by pro-democracy groups demanding extension of the franchise and other reforms. This has become a regular annual event that could have been expected to be large this year given that the president was in town to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the handover of the territory to Chinese rule, and to inaugurate the new Chief Executive, C.Y. Leung. Hu gave a sermon to the new leader on the morning of July 1 then was whisked out of town so missed the vast demo.

But the march was even bigger than expected, the biggest since 2004, variously estimated at 60,000 by the police, 400,000 by the organizers and around 100,000 by independent observers. March counting is always difficult and in this case many people walked part but not all the six-km route, joining a procession from Victoria Park to the new Legislative Council building on the shoreline of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor.

The march began at 3 pm and did not finish till around 8.30. It brought together a coterie of pressure groups -- those wanting more democracy and the defense of local autonomy, those concerned mainly about human rights on the mainland, those focused on Hong Kong's stark income gaps, and those fed up with the revelations of sleaze at the highest levels of the territory's government.

If Hu indeed had watched on television, he would doubtless have been impressed by the size of the crowd but more worried, indeed infuriated, by some of the banners. There were large numbers of old, British-era Hong Kong flags, which carry the British Union flag in one corner. It has become a symbol not so much of nostalgia for the British as a banner for those demanding real autonomy. Then there was a huge Falun Gong contingent complete with a 200-strong blue and white uniformed band of men and women playing drums, flutes, horns and tubas. And there were plenty of reminders for Hu of the sensitivity of the Hong Kong people to the probable murder of mainland dissident Li Wangyang.

But what Mr Hu probably did not see, and perhaps should be even greater cause for alarm in Beijing, was a public opinion poll which showed that 64 percent of those polled thought that Hong Kong had become a worse place since the handover. Only 17 percent

though it was better. This poll marked a huge change in sentiment from a similar one by the same pollsters in 2007 when 40 percent thought it improved since 1997.

Such polls can be erratic and be responses to recent events rather than reasoned assessments of the 15 years. British rule may now be sufficiently in the past that it is viewed with rose-tinted spectacles, or at least as reflected by the popular last governor, Chris Patten, rather than earlier aspects of foreign rule. Nonetheless it clearly reflects not merely dissatisfaction with the conduct of its recent past, present and would be leaders, all of whom have been found wanting in terms of honesty and transparency.

A major part is clearly caused by the belief that Hong Kong's separate, autonomous status is being persistently undermined by officials and their attendant tycoons far more interested in ingratiating themselves with Beijing than acting in the territory's interest. Hong Kong people's sense of their separate identity has, opinion polls show, been gaining ground at the expense of specifically Chinese identity – the opposite direction in which Beijing expected them to move.

China's achievements in space, in sports and in international prestige may impress Hong Kong people but often they are overshadowed by more immediate concerns about the mainland's impact on the territory, whether hordes of tourists, mothers-to-be or official kowtowing in practice as well as theory to mainland demands. Events surrounding the Hu visit have simply played to that popular perception, the police presence being out of all proportion given that Hong Kong has a history of large but peaceful demonstrations.

The widespread hostility to the mainland has been little assuaged by Beijing's offers of "benefits" – mainly marginal advantages for Hong Kong as China slowly opens its financial markets. But even these "gifts" are often worth more in theory than practice. Mainland access to Hong Kong stocks was first mooted in 2007 but only now is a scheme for mainland investment in exchange-traded funds in Hong Kong stocks to get off the ground, and will not be big enough to have major impact.

As a separate economic unit with its own rules and currency, Hong Kong should not expect any privileges. But its leaders have been in the habit of making a big fuss about these supposed gifts as a reason for urging greater integration with the mainland in ways which can only erode Hong Kong's identity and its trump cards – separate legal and judicial system and unique global orientation.

The size of the protest turnout puts C.Y. Leung in a very difficult position. Although most people favored him over his only Beijing-approved rival in the selection process, subsequent revelations have not only cast doubt on his honesty but highlighted Hong Kong's deep concerns about autonomy.

Leung is credited with wanting to address social and wealth-gap issues but he has long been suspected of being a closet member of the Chinese Communist Party. As a hierarchical and elite group, party members are expected to take direction, making the own views – and those of the Hong Kong people – subservient to the party and its claims to be the incarnation of patriotism. The perception of Leung's uncomfortable closeness to the masters in Beijing wasn't helped by the fact that he chose to deliver his inaugural address in Mandarin, the language of the mainland, rather than Cantonese, which is the first language of more than 90 percent of Hong Kong's people.

Even Leung's promises of more public housing, more welfare for the deserving poor and a better environment may prove harder to implement than they seem given the ponderous ways of the bureaucracy and the influence of the city's oligarchs, people still fettered by Hu despite the burden they place on the broader economy.

But because he starts with a low standing among the public, Leung at least now has the chance to rise in popular estimation by carrying out his pledges and by being seen to follow the desires of Hong Kong people for autonomy and democracy rather than the dictates of the party.

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