

# Hong Kong has made its voice heard in Beijing

*The city-state's protests have effectively killed a controversial extradition bill and may have recalibrated relations with China*



Protesters rally against the controversial extradition bill in Hong Kong.

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If the organisers' estimates are to be believed, the two million people who turned out on Hong Kong's streets may have constituted not just the biggest demonstration in the city-state's history. Given that Hong Kong is home to seven million, it may have been the largest protest ever, in terms of the proportion of the overall population who attended, at around 29 per cent.

They were there to demand, principally, the retraction of a proposed bill that would allow extradition from the territory to mainland China – a move that critics complained would undermine Hong Kong's protected autonomous status and expose individuals and businesses to what they view as the People's Republic's more opaque and politically influenced courts.

Sunday's protest appeared to have the desired effect. Carrie Lam, the former British colony's chief executive, had announced that the bill would be suspended indefinitely on Saturday. That decision followed a well-attended demonstration the previous weekend and violent clashes between police and protesters last Wednesday, when a debate on the bill had been planned.

By the end of this most recent gathering, Ms Lam had issued a grovelling apology and pro-Beijing lawmakers were making

it clear that while the bill may not officially be withdrawn, it was dead in the water; it would not be reintroduced and would effectively "die" when the city's Legislative Council ends its present term next July.

Ms Lam, a stern and long-standing civil servant who took over as the Beijing-approved chief executive in 2017, is now fighting for her political life. "We never really thought two months ago that there was much chance of defeating it," says Philip Bowring, a former editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review who is married to the pro-democracy politician Claudia Mo.

"The government's own incompetence" is, he says, what led to the confrontation. Ms Lam attempted to rush the bill through, and continued to do so despite the mounting protests. "She's a hard-nosed bureaucrat who's terrible at politics," Mr Bowring says. "Everything she's done has just increased the people's opposition."

The consensus appears to be that Ms Lam's credibility is now shot. After what many consider to be the biggest cave-in to public pressure by the Chinese leadership since President Xi Jinping took office seven years ago, the question is not whether she can recover her authority, but how long she will stay in office to save face.

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enough independence for Ms Lam to be made the fall guy for this debacle. This despite the fact that virtually nobody really thinks that Hong Kong's leader, who regularly met with top Communist party officials, took the decision to introduce the bill without the nod from Beijing.

So, how did they miscalculate so badly? One theory is that the leadership wanted to see what it could get away with in undermining the leeway granted to the city-state under the "one country, two systems" approach implemented as part of the agreement when the UK returned Hong Kong to China in 1997.

Article 23 of its mini-constitution, the Basic Law, mandates that national security legislation should be passed that prohibits "any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion" against the central government.

The last time an attempt was made to do so, in 2003, there were huge demonstrations and the bill was withdrawn. This led, in the opinion of many, to the resignation of the then chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, in 2005. If the extradition law was a test of opinion to see if Article 23 could be acted upon now, it failed.

"This was a step too far. It really frightened everyone," says a senior figure in the city's business community. "The threat to what the world views as Hong

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Kong's western-style standard of rule of law was too much. Not just academics and activists but people in finance, shipping and commerce – people who normally might have been supportive of Beijing – got scared."

Within the past week, there have been reports of tycoons moving hundreds of millions of dollars offshore, worried that their assets would no longer be protected by the firewall of Hong Kong's separate – and much admired – legal jurisdiction. US senators and congressional representatives have also been threatening to introduce legislation that would end the city's special trading status with America. The potential hit to the economy was taken seriously, both in Hong Kong and Beijing.

Referring to the fact that

Hong Kong's output made up 16 per cent of the Chinese economy in 1997, but only three percent in 2018, the business figure says: "Hong Kong both is and isn't important. Yes, it has diminished in terms of its contribution to GDP. But it is still vital as a gateway. More than half of foreign direct investment into China last year came from Hong Kong."

Lost in much of the coverage is the fact that the bill was supposed to be hedged with all sorts of guarantees that a new treaty would not allow people to be extradited for political or religious reasons, but only for a limited number of offences such as murder and rape. Hong Kong has also been severely criticised abroad for its lack of extradition arrangements – it only has them with 20 countries at present. Ms Lam claimed she originally brought the proposal forward because a Hong Kong man who admitted murdering his girlfriend in Taiwan could not even be charged in the city-state, let alone extradited. There was, to be fair, some justification for the law.

It was what it appeared to represent, however, that proved too much for the people of Hong Kong to stomach. Chinese media have denounced the protests as having been stirred up by meddling foreigners. It is perfectly true that politicians from afar, such as the territory's

last British governor, Chris Patten, have waded in. Its people, he wrote last week, "have seen their government connive with the Communist regime in Beijing to undermine their way of life and freedoms."

At least Lord Patten had the grace to admit that Hong Kong was "a colony we acquired in woeful circumstances". So woeful, others might say, that the UK and the US have no right to comment on the affairs of a part of China that only existed as a separate entity because it had been stolen by imperial pirates in the 19th century.

But, ultimately, Beijing and Ms Lam have not backed down because of foreign finger wagging. While it is true that they have done so out of economic self-interest, they have also had to listen to the people of Hong Kong. That is something to be celebrated. As is the fact that, while its citizens may not be able to vote for their chief executive (that choice is effectively made by Beijing), they do have the power to defenestrate their leader – as was shown in 2005 with Mr Tung, and will surely be shown in Ms Lam's inevitable resignation.

The lesson that may be learned by Beijing, says Mr Bowring, "is that they can't just ignore Hong Kong sentiment. They have to have someone there who has rapport with the people."