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# China anti-dissent playbook may fail in Hong Kong



Pro-democracy lawmakers display placards against Li Fei, deputy secretary general of the National People's Congress' Standing Committee, during a briefing session in Hong Kong Monday, Sept. 1, 2014. Hong Kong pro-democracy legislators have disrupted the Beijing official's speech as he sought to explain a decision to tightly limit voting reforms for the southern Chinese financial hub. The placards read "Break a promise" and "Shameful." (AP Photo/Kin Cheung) (The Associated Press)

By **KELVIN CHAN, CHRISTOPHER BODEEN** Associated Press

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**H**ONG KONG (AP) — China's Communist leaders have pulled out their usual playbook to suppress resistance to their plans to tightly limit the first direct election of Hong Kong's leader, but are likely to find that the results are quite different.

Beijing is blaming radicals and foreigners and showing off its military might, all things unlikely to go down well in the freewheeling capitalist bastion where a sizeable middle class accustomed to freedom of speech and the rule of law plans to push back with acts of civil disobedience.

Rowdy protests on Monday against a visiting Beijing official who was explaining the central government's decision signaled a new stage in Hong Kong's battle for democracy.

The ruling came after months of reminders from Beijing that it is ultimately in charge of the city despite its substantial autonomy. But the reaction in the former British colony is shaping up to be unlike anything Beijing is used to encountering when quelling dissent on the mainland.

Dozens of pro-democracy lawmakers heckled Li Fei, the deputy secretary general of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, or legislature, as he explained the election process, a rare occasion on which a Beijing official was exposed to open defiance.

They chanted slogans and waved signs accusing China's central government of "breaking its promise" to let Hong Kong have full democracy. Security officers escorted some out and carried or dragged away others. Outside the venue, a group of activists trying to storm barricades to get inside were pepper-sprayed by police.

Democracy groups reacted with anger after Li's announcement on Sunday ruling out open nominations for candidates in Hong Kong's first direct elections in 2017. Students vowed to boycott classes, and leaders of the Occupy Central movement said the city had entered an "era of civil disobedience," adding they would go ahead with plans to paralyze the financial district with 10,000 protesters to press for genuine democracy.

Li dismissed the threats, saying "the Chinese central government believes that the Hong Kong government, especially the high-quality police force and law enforcement agencies, with the support of Hong Kong citizens, will be able to handle it."

Beijing's hard line reflects President Xi Jinping's ongoing crackdown on mainland dissent to remove all challenges to the Communist Party, as well as Hong Kong's waning importance to China as economic reforms boost other mainland financial hubs such as Shanghai.

China has sought to blame the opposition in Hong Kong on interference by Britain and other unidentified foreign forces, an echo of Beijing's frequent attacks on "overseas anti-China forces" it blames for encouraging dissidents and fueling instability among its ethnic minorities.

It also accused Hong Kong's opposition of having become radicalized and refusing to compromise.

"No matter what the opposition does, the central government won't budge from its stance, because it cannot allow the reins of power in Hong Kong to shift to the opposition," an editorial in the China Daily said Monday.

While some pro-democracy lawmakers are considered radical, Hong Kong democracy supporters come from a broad cross section of society, including students, religious leaders and financial workers. Occupy Central's leaders include two university professors and a clergyman.

Hong Kong activists operate openly in a way unthinkable on the mainland. Beijing exercises a broad range of punitive measures against dissidents, ranging from lengthy jail sentences to constant harassment and

extrajudicial house arrest.

Political gatherings are routinely broken up, even in private homes, and protests allowed only when they align with Beijing's agenda, such as criticizing Japan or the United States. China also polices the Internet for political discussions, blocks Facebook and Twitter, and demands that their Chinese equivalents report and remove any sensitive content.

Through such methods, Beijing keeps its critics fearful, impoverished and disorganized. Dissidents on the mainland are frequently charged with subversion, but also face what many consider trumped-up charges of disrupting social order, tax evasion or even organizing a crowd to block traffic.

Such restrictions are largely absent in Hong Kong. Activists are free to organize large anti-government protest rallies attracting tens of thousands of demonstrators, thanks to guarantees in the city's mini-constitution ensuring freedom of speech.

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More than 100 people were charged with unlawful assembly and obstructing police, but most were later released. More than 100 people were charged with unlawful assembly and obstructing police, but most were later released. More than 100 people were charged with unlawful assembly and obstructing police, but most were later released.

A report last week that Chinese armored personnel carriers were seen on Hong Kong's streets raised concerns that Beijing was sending a signal to the city ahead of Sunday's voting reform announcement. While the People's Liberation Army has bases in the city, it typically keeps a low profile, so the photographs of at least four of the military vehicles in the Apple Daily newspaper made democracy activists wonder about the timing.

A hard line on democracy in Hong Kong will also do nothing to advance China's courtship of Taiwan, the self-governing island democracy that Beijing is determined to bring under its control.

The "one country, two systems" formula under which Hong Kong is governed was conceived originally by former leader Deng Xiaoping as a way to coax Taiwan into unifying with the mainland. The idea never had much attraction for the island's population, and as with their Hong Kong counterparts, young Taiwanese are growing increasingly alienated from Beijing. The island's population overwhelmingly favors maintaining their de-facto independence from China, and Beijing's stance on Hong Kong would mark a substantial setback from Taiwan's current democratic freedoms.

"Democracy and popular voting are universal values," the Taiwanese agency responsible for mainland China policy said in a statement Monday. "We understand the Hong Kong people's expectation for the implementation of real universal suffrage."

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Bodeen reported from Beijing.

