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# Hong Kong ready for 1997, but is China?

By Michael E DeGolyer

WHAT were the last Legco elections really all about?

Basically, they were about time. In fact, the transition of Hong Kong from British colony to China's Special Administrative Region has always been, fundamentally, a matter of time.

In 1982, when negotiations started, China was barely recovering from a Cultural Revolution which had nearly destroyed it. Whether it could become a modern country and make the transition in one piece was really doubtful. Capitalism? A World Power? Paramount leader Deng Xiaoping set his fond hopes on their way on the feet of a pair of black and white cats — it didn't matter as long as they caught mice.

With such a record, the question plaguing Hong Kong people all through the transition was (and is) whether such a "backward" country could really understand capitalistic, advanced Hong Kong well enough by 1997 to be able to govern it.

Meanwhile, another race against the clock was on in Hong Kong itself. Promised a "high degree of autonomy" in the Joint Declaration of 1984, Hong Kong faces a dilemma — does it have enough time to develop the political leadership and the understanding of its people well enough to virtually rule themselves as envisioned?

As of 1981, the total number of Hong Kong people with experience in self-rule and electoral politics could fit in the Cultural Centre with room to spare. In the one type of election allowed until then, for the Urban Council, as many as 6,195 people elected half its members for a grand total of 12.

These 12 elected officials were the basis upon which "a high degree of autonomy" had to be built.

There were no political parties (they were outlawed and remained so until 1990), no real campaigning experience, no real oversight of the government, no sense even that the government should be accountable to the people of Hong Kong.

## ANALYSIS

Democracy? A foreign word for foreigners.

So, after all this time has there been enough?

There's room for cautious hope.

Hong Kong certainly seems ready. The elections on Sunday saw 920,567 people turn out to vote.

In fact, over this past year, in all three elections held, 1,381,539 votes were cast. That's one heck of a sight better than the 6,195 who turned up in 1981 to vote for the 12.

The political parties now span the spectrum of opinion. They have mobilised thousands of people to help in these "final" elections. They co-ordinated people all over the territory, strategised, adapted, and campaigned hard and well.

There now exists nearly 500 people in leadership positions and many more with the experience of democratic campaigning and having to run on their record.

The accountability of government is well understood and democracy no longer a foreign word, although some in the civil service still seem to struggle a bit with some of its concepts, such as an open government.

Hong Kong is ready for 1997 and its promised high autonomy.

But is China?

No one doubts that China now understands capitalist economics much better than in 1982, though the leadership still doesn't seem reconciled to it.

What remains in doubt is whether China understands the political side of capitalism.

The freedom to choose any product being offered, the freedom to jump in and compete in providing new products, the necessity of allowing both profit and loss, wealth and bankruptcy engenders a logic which extends inevitably into government.

If one can choose what one wants everywhere else, then choice of leadership in government is a natural development.

If one can fail and go broke in business, and another take his place to try their hand, then the same needs to happen in politics.

The success of the capitalist, "free" market system in creating the fabulous wealth of Hong Kong is obvious to all.

What we can't be sure of yet is whether the Beijing powers understand the other side of the coin — the success of the free market in ideas and leadership that the political parties and open elections of Hong Kong now represent.

If that political free market is allowed to continue after 1997, then there has been time enough for the necessary changes to happen to ensure a successful union of China and Hong Kong.

If it is seriously damaged after 1997, then it's only another matter of time before Hong Kong's golden goose joins the one in the fairy tale.

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