

Analysis

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Stop violence and restore order to seek common development

A few days ago, the Hong Kong SAR Government held its first community dialogue session. The 150-minute sincere dialogue, attended by 150 people, has been considered as a common step for Hong Kong residents towards cessation of violence and restoration of order to find a way out of the predicament. Trampling on the rule of law, disruption of social order, economic shocks, and negative impact on people's livelihoods... In the past three months, violent acts conducted by a handful of radical opposition and extremists have caused severe damages to Hong Kong. The chaos has made more and more Hong Kong residents realize the despicable acts of violent radicals by misleading the good people to sabotage Hong Kong under the pretext of anti-amendment, and has also made the international community fully aware of the ill intentions of external forces to interfere in China's internal affairs and incite a "colored revolution" in Hong Kong. Recently, representatives from all walks of life, as well as many communities and associations in Hong Kong have made statements, advertisements and speeches to jointly condemn the violent rages, calling for ending violence and restoring order with a view to combining efforts in pursuit of common development in Hong Kong.

In the past 22 years since Hong Kong's return, Hong Kong has kept its distinct features and strengths; its allure of being a vibrant metropolis where the East meets the West has remained as strong as ever - the main reason lies in the socio-economic and political stability. People are keenly aware that maintaining social harmony and stability is not only in the common interest of all sectors of Hong Kong society and foreign investors, but also an important prerequisite for Hong Kong to maintain its status as an international financial, trade and shipping center.

Hong Kong's stability and prosperity will increase its competitiveness, while chaos will only force the entire society to "pay the price". Therefore, it is the aspiration of Hong Kong people to stop the violence and restore order at an early date.

Nevertheless, in defiance of the deplorable acts of radicals and rioters in Hong Kong, and disregarding the public aspiration of Hong Kong society, some intransigent external forces still attempt to meddle in Hong Kong affairs. On September 25th, under the guise of human rights and democracy, the U.S. Congress and some politicians approved the so-called Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019.

The bill, under the cloak of "protecting Hong Kong people's freedom of speech and peaceful assembly", seeks to maliciously defame the Chinese central government, undermine "One Country, Two Systems", interfere in Hong Kong affairs, and discredit legitimate law enforcement measures of Hong Kong police to uphold law and order, revealing the ulterior motives to cheer anti-China forces and radicals, and further complicate the situation in Hong Kong for their unlawful benefits.

It goes without saying that the turmoil has reflected some deep-rooted conflicts and problems in Hong Kong society, which are attributed to several factors of complex historical factors and social roots, as well as the international context. These problems can neither be addressed in a day nor in one step, and it is impossible to resolve the issues by strife.

Hong Kong's current top priority is to restore order as soon as possible, seize development opportunities, and focus on developing the economy and improving people's livelihood. Development is fundamental for Hong Kong's survival, and it holds the golden key to resolving various issues in Hong Kong.

In order to cease the violence and restore order for developing economy and livelihood, the HKSAR Government has taken various measures in good faith. In late August, Hong Kong's Financial Secretary adopted relief measures featuring a spending package of allowances and subsidies, including exemption of some government fees, extra social security allowances, and subsidies for kindergarten, primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong. On Sept 4, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, Chief Executive of the HKSAR Government, proposed four actions to break the current predicament. Faced with the complex living conditions in Hong Kong, New World Development of Cheng's family and other big families in Hong Kong donated farmland to mitigate people's livelihood issues.

This year 2019 marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. After 70 years of hard work and growth, China, the once poverty-stricken country, has become the world's second largest economy, and is getting closer to the world's center stage. China has made historical transformation in terms of economy, international standing and profile. China's continuous and rapid development has provided an invaluable opportunity, an inexhaustible source of strengths and broad space for Hong Kong's development. — Embassy of China

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A picture taken on Sept 15, 2019 shows cows grazing at the shore of a basin at Mount Amulsar, near the village of Gndevaz. — AFP

Armenia villagers protest gold mine plans

Armenian villagers are locked in what they say is a David-and-Goliath style battle for the environment and their livelihoods, standing guard around the clock to protect their land from a multinational mining company. Protesters say planned gold mining in the south will not only pollute drinking water but also damage some of the top tourist spots in the small Caucasus mountain nation. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, however, insists the project at Mount Amulsar is a vital source of foreign investment and a sign his country is open for business.

Pashinyan was brought to power last year on the back of popular protests, but activists' efforts are now directed against him and a perceived preference for investment over the wellbeing of his people. "The mine will pollute water, soil, and air," said Erazik Stepanyan, a 57-year-old from Gndevaz, a tiny village a few kilometres from Mount Amulsar. "We don't want our children to suffer from serious illnesses, we will not let anybody defile our nature."

The project is being developed by Armenia's biggest foreign investor, the British-American company Lydian. Work has been on hold for over a year after activists and locals set up pickets, blocking access to the construction site. "We will fight till the end so that Amulsar never becomes a mine," said 18-year-old Suzi Humanayan, whose family has taken part in the pickets.

The sentiment is shared in the spa town of Jermuk, where locals fear the mine would destroy their main source of income. "No tourist will come to Jermuk if such a haz-

ardous mine is being exploited nearby. Our businesses will be destroyed," said Mkhitir Stepanyan, who sells medicinal herbs. "Nobody will buy my herbs in fear they are poisoned by the discharges from the mine," he said, looking anxiously at sheaves of chamomile, St. John's wort, and mint piled up at his kiosk. The planned mine is near the sources of rivers which flow into picturesque Lake Sevan, another tourist draw and the country's main source of drinking water. Demonstrations against the mine have spread to the capital Yerevan, where thousands of people took to the streets last month chanting: "No to ecological disaster!" In August, protesters blockaded the country's presidential palace and parliament, demanding the project be ditched.

'Unmanageable ecological consequences'

Lydian, which has already spent some \$400 million to develop Amulsar's deposits of gold ore - which contain an estimated 40 tons of pure gold - has dismissed ecologists' fears as unsubstantiated. The company denounced an "enormous misinformation around the Amulsar project" as part of a "campaign by rival mining companies". "Lydian has been fully transparent in its environmental and operating practices. Those practices meet or exceed all applicable international standards," the company's managing director, Hayk Aloyan, told AFP.

But local ecologists have warned of the potential dangers. Karine Danielyan, head of the NGO Association for Sustainable Human Development, said chemicals used in

the mining process could lead to the oxidation of water in major rivers. This would make them "unusable for irrigation and drinking." "Water pollution could harm irreparably the ecosystem of the Lake Sevan and the mineral water sources in Jermuk," the resort which gave its name to Armenia's most famous mineral water brand, she said.

The director of Armenia's Institute of Chemical Physics, Seyran Minasyan, warned of "unmanageable ecological consequences" if the project is given the go-ahead. "All the mines in Armenia are being operated barbarically, with no respect of ecological norms," he added.

Shaken public trust

In a video statement posted when protests broke out in Yerevan, Pashinyan insisted the project would be completed and downplayed potential ecological risks. He said Armenia's investment climate will be seriously damaged if the project - which will boost Armenia's GDP by \$185 million annually and create hundreds of well-paid jobs - goes under. Political analysts said Pashinyan's backing of the project has shaken public trust in the leader, who has enjoyed widespread popularity among Armenians, long frustrated with the corrupt elites he has swept from power.

"The Amulsar case might lead to divisions within Pashinyan's ruling-party majority in parliament," said analyst Vigen Hakobyan. "He is under serious pressure both from civil society and from a big transnational corporation backed by the US and British governments." — AFP

Dissidents under late Uzbek leader still out in the cold

Journalist and former prisoner Dilmurod Saidov knows a thing or two about the brutal rule of Uzbekistan's first leader, the late Islam Karimov. His house is full of reminders of the wife and daughter who died in a 2009 car crash that he never accepted was an accident, en route to visit him in a jail where he should never have served time. "God gave me such a faithful wife and such a wonderful daughter," he told AFP, of his partner Baro, framed in a photo on a table in his flat, and five-year-old Rukhshona, who stared out from the desktop background of a battered computer in a festive frock. "Then he took them back again."

Saidov, 57, is one of more than 30 people imprisoned on politically motivated charges who have been released since Karimov's death in 2016 as new leader Shavkat Mirziyoyev takes steps to reverse the country's isolationist course. Mirziyoyev's reforms have won plaudits, and seen the ex-Soviet republic - long ranked as one of the world's worst abusers of human rights - throw its doors open to tourists and foreign investments surge.

But the new president has not publicly renounced Karimov, a man he served as prime minister for more than 13 years before stepping up as acting head of state three years ago, and has kept much of the authoritarian system intact. In a series of interviews with AFP in the capital Tashkent, former political prisoners like Saidov acknowledged that progress had been made, but said abuses were continuing and urged the world not to turn a blind eye.

Suspicious car crash

Saidov, an independent journalist, was arrested in

2009 and convicted of bribery and forgery, charges he denies and says were punishment for years of reporting on corruption and rights abuses in Karimov's Uzbekistan. Sentenced to 12 and a half years in prison after what Human Rights Watch called at the time "a flawed trial brought on politically motivated charges", he was granted early release just over a year after Karimov died.

Since emerging from prison he has tried to resume his rights work, but a bid with another prominent former detainee to register a campaign group called Restoration of Justice has been refused three times by the justice ministry. His attempts to overturn his conviction and to investigate the car crash that killed his wife and daughter have been similarly stonewalled.

Just before their deaths, he says, prosecutors threatened to take Rukhshona hostage if he did not confess to accusations of bribery and falsification of documents and testify against other citizens. He found out about their deaths several days later from his brother. Saidov has never believed the official version of the crash - that a truck collided with the taxi they were travelling in, killing the driver and all five passengers.

The trucker sentenced over the crash was released one year into a seven-and-a-half-year sentence, Saidov says, and died the year after he left prison. "The staff at her kindergarten knew about (the threats)," says Saidov, who said he contracted tuberculosis in prison. "Whoever ordered this (car crash) must have been powerful, because prosecutors are still covering it up." The late strongman ruled the country bordering Afghanistan with an iron fist for more than a quarter of a century. International organizations and foreign governments have acknowledged the scale of change in Uzbekistan, a landlocked Central Asian country which once showed little shame in its status as an elite rights offender.

'House of Torture'

In August, Mirziyoyev won broad praise for ordering the closure of the notorious Jasyk penal colony - known



Uzbek journalist and former prisoner Dilmurod Said holds family photos of his wife and daughter, who died in a 2009 car crash, during an interview in Tashkent on July 26, 2019. — AFP

as the "House of Torture" for the extreme abuses inflicted on inmates - in the country's remote northwest. The prison, a grim calling card of Karimov's rule, was briefly home to Akzam Turgunov, a rights activist who met Saidov during a stint in another jail and is now his partner in the Restoration of Justice group. "It was a place they sent prisoners they wanted to break," Turgunov told AFP. "I thought I was mentally prepared, but when they began to drip boiling water (on my body) and told me I would not leave the place alive I was gripped by an intense fear."

Turgunov, who was released a few months short of the end of a 10-year sentence for extortion, says Mirziyoyev's order was an important step. But he fears it could be a maneuver "to distract foreign rights organizations" from other abuses that he says continue to take place in the majority-Muslim republic of 33 million. Human Rights Watch says that thousands of people are still imprisoned in Uzbekistan for political reasons. — AFP

Restoring felon voting rights a 'mess' in Florida

Clifford Tyson wants to help choose America's next president. But the Florida resident fears his vote might return him to jail. Tyson, 63, owes court-ordered fines and fees for three felony convictions, one for robbery, two for theft, all decades old. Under a Florida law that went into effect July 1, he must pay those penalties before casting a ballot or risk being prosecuted for voter fraud.

Tyson searched court records, first on his own, then with the help of a nonprofit legal advocacy group. They say that because Florida has no comprehensive system for tracking such fines, the documents don't make clear what he owes. The records, viewed by Reuters, show potential sums ranging from \$846 to a couple thousand dollars related to crimes he committed in the late 1970s and 1990s. Tyson says he won't risk voting until Florida authorities can tell him for sure. "Until there is clarity, as much as I want to vote, I won't do it," Tyson said.

The Tampa pastor is now a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the payments law, which was crafted by Florida's Republican-controlled legislature and signed by Governor Ron DeSantis, also a Republican. The law came just

months after Floridians approved a ballot initiative restoring voting rights to more than 1 million felons who have completed their sentences; that change to the state's Constitution created a potentially huge new crop of voters in a critical battleground state ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

The lawsuit, filed in June by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Brennan Center for Justice, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund, alleges the fees requirement defies the will of Florida voters and amounts to an illegal poll tax on newly enfranchised Florida felons, many of them minorities.

But another argument is shaping up to be central to the plaintiffs' case: Florida has no consolidated system for determining what felons owe or certifying that they have paid up. It's a situation that ex-offenders say makes it virtually impossible for them to prove they are eligible to vote. Those claims are bolstered by state election officials who say they can't calculate what felons owe, either, according to a Reuters review of 7 depositions, emails and other internal correspondence from voting administrators submitted by plaintiffs' attorneys as part of the lawsuit.

Florida has no centralized database where records of court-ordered fines and fees - and any payments of those penalties - are stored, election and court officials say. To get that information, felons typically must search documents in courts where they were convicted, be they federal or state, inside or outside Florida. Records have been found to be incomplete, contradictory or missing, plaintiffs' attorneys say. With the Feb 18 deadline to register for the state's

2020 presidential primary approaching, the issue is taking on urgency. An estimated 436,000 felons have fees to settle before they can vote, according to a study by University of Florida political scientist Daniel Smith, an expert witness for the ACLU. The study was based on court data and Department of Corrections records.

The stakes are high. Florida commands 29 of the 538 electoral votes that are used under the US Electoral College system to select the American president. In Florida and most other states, the candidate who places first in the popular vote - even if just by a hair - wins all the electoral votes. Florida has a history of tight elections and contested outcomes. Plaintiffs' attorneys say Florida has shifted all responsibility for compliance with the new payments law to ex-offenders, who risk prosecution if they get it wrong. The state contends the legislature merely implemented the constitutional amendment as it was written on the ballot.

The legislation, known as SB 7066, "sows seeds of confusion," said Leah Aden, deputy director of litigation at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. "It will chill participation." Some of the state's 67 county elections supervisors - the public servants who ultimately decide which felons get culled from the rolls and which can stay - expressed concern in their depositions and to Reuters about making mistakes that could invite challenges to future election results.

Five testified recently in the lawsuit that they lack the manpower to do detailed searches or have no way of ascertaining for certain whether ex-offenders have met their financial obligations under SB 7066. — Reuters