

# Social Movements in Hong Kong

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*Social movements occur not only because of political opportunities but also due to a perceived threat to citizens. Popular contention has remained an important mode of political participation in Hong Kong since 1997 when its sovereignty was handed over to China. Many influential collective actions in Hong Kong occurred when residents felt a threat had arisen from policies made by the city government or Beijing. By examining the Anti-Extradition-Bill movement in Hong Kong, this paper explores how threat triggers and sustains social movements. It finds that threat both facilitates the mobilization of social movements and sustains them. Threat strengthens solidarity among movement supporters because of their shared concerns and goals. It sustains a movement when government responses confirm participants' belief in the continual existence of the threat. The Anti-Extradition-Bill movement deepened the distrust between local residents and Beijing, resulting in the promulgation of the National Security Law by Beijing in May 2020.*

**KEYWORDS:** Hong Kong; social movements; threat.

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Protests and social movements remain an important mode of political participation in society regardless of the political system. People stage collective action to bring about changes and to make their claims heard by pertinent authorities or the public. Needless to say, it is conditional for collective action to occur and succeed. Resources and political opportunities are believed to be crucial to the occurrence and success of collective action (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978), though political opportunities are not predetermined. Jenkins and Perrow (1977) contend that collective action is rarely a viable option for the poor because of a lack of resources and the threat of repression. “When deprived groups do mobilize, it is due to the

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interjection of external resources” (Jenkins & Perrow, 1977, p. 251). Resources can “include legitimacy, money facilities, and labor” (McCarthy & Zald, 1997). However, not all collective actions occur because of the rise of political opportunity or the mobilization of resources. McAdam (1982, p. 31) contends that the fact that weak groups fail to act “is more often attributable to their shared perception of powerlessness than to any inherent impotence on their part.” Indeed, threats can also trigger collective action because a lack of action amounts to losses on the part of the participants. Thus, people who face threats are more likely to be mobilized even when they are uncertain about the outcome of their actions. As Pinard (2011, p. 17) writes, “threats can greatly increase the sense of grievances, as when the anticipation of increased hardships accompanies current ones.”

The mobilization effect of threats aids in our understanding of popular contention in Hong Kong after 1997 when its sovereignty was returned to China. Despite “one country, two systems,” residents in Hong Kong lack institutionalized channels of political participation. Neither the chief executive nor many of the region’s legislators are directly elected by the people, and the former are not directly accountable to the latter, but to Beijing. This political arrangement dictates that the people of Hong Kong may fail to prevent their interests from being ignored or violated *ex ante* because they have limited influence in policy making. As a result, they often defend their interests *ex post* after policies or decisions are made. Popular contention used to be an important method employed by the residents to defend their interests in the city.

After 1997, influential collective action in Hong Kong was generally reactive or defensive in the sense that these actions were triggered by government policies that were believed to sacrifice political rights or freedoms that citizens had enjoyed. Beijing or the Hong Kong government sometimes made a provocative policy that was perceived as a threat to the interests of the residents, and the latter then staged collective action to defend their rights. Threat-triggered collective actions were an important feature of popular contention in Hong Kong after 1997.

By examining the Anti-Extradition-Bill (AEB) movement in Hong Kong from 2019 to 2020, this paper demonstrates the two types of influence that threat exerts on popular contention in Hong Kong. One is that threats trigger collective action because they force residents to face losses if they remain silent. Second, in threat-triggered action, the government’s unwillingness to concede only confirms the belief of participants in its unreliability. As a result, government coercion leaves the people little choice but to continue with their actions. Thus, coercion helps to sustain the movement. In these circumstances, even government concessions lose their credibility. The AEB movement boded ill for the future of the city because it deepened the distrust

between Beijing and movement supporters who constituted a large segment of the population. Consequently, the persistent movement in the city motivated Beijing to tighten its control by enforcing the National Security Law in 2020.

## **Threats and Social Movements**

A social movement involves the sustained interaction between its participants and its target. Tarrow (1998, p. 4) defines social movements as “collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities.” Political opportunities are seen as crucial to social movements. “Political opportunities signal to communities experiencing adversity that if they mobilize in the present, they are more likely to alleviate existing wrongs and ‘collective bads’” (Almeida, 2018, p. 44). Yet social movements occur not only because of the rise of political opportunities but also due to threats. As Tilly suggests, “a given amount of threat tends to generate more collective action than the ‘same’ amount of opportunity” (Tilly, 1978, pp. 134–135). Threat triggers reactive mobilization that can be caused by political, economic, or demographic causes (Van Dyke & Soule, 2002). An erosion of rights or increased state repression may also create threats (Almeida, 2018).

Reactive social movements involve attempts by a group to reassert claims to political or economic rights or resources that they have lost or are to lose (Tilly, 1978). Tilly (1978, p. 135) contends that “response to opportunity is likely to require more alternation of the group’s organization and mobilization pattern than is response to threat; the group can respond to threat via its established routines.” Threats help mobilization because they have stronger mobilization power than some forms of grievances. Grievances are different from threats, but they are connected. They can be defined as “troublesome matters of conditions, and the feeling associated with them — such as dissatisfaction, fear, indignation, resentment, and more shock” (Snow & Soule, 2010, p. 23).

Threat has a different impact than opportunities by increasing the intensity of existing grievances or creating new ones. Bergstrand contends that grievances involving a loss are perceived as more immoral, unjust, and important than grievances involving a gain. “Loss-based grievances also generate stronger emotions, increase willingness to engage in activism, and produce perceptions of greater public support” (Bergstrand, 2014). Pinard (2011, p. 17) similarly writes that “threats can greatly increase the sense of grievances, as when the anticipation of increased hardships accompanies current ones.”

Threats also mobilize collective action because they are perceived to leave the threatened with few options. Threats are defined as unwanted changes that likely will make popular sectors worse off if they fail to mobilize against them (Van Dyke & Soule, 2002). Threats also denote the probability that exiting benefits will be taken away or new harms inflicted if the threatened fail to act collectively (Almeida, 2003, p. 347). People generally inflate the value of those things they already possess when someone else is seeking to take them away (Tilly, 1978, p. 135). Threats contribute to mobilization because they indicate to pertinent parties or members that a lack of action means accepting the loss. In these circumstances, even partial concessions may not stop the action because the target at which the collective action is directed is not perceived to be trustworthy by the participants.

When threats occur, the free riding issue can be solved because participants have a strong consensus on the need for action. Certainly, threat-triggered collective action may still require mobilization. Almeida points out that communities require some level of resource infrastructure to fend off threats, and the infrastructure includes the human, organizational, material, technical, and experiential stockpiles of capital available to the people facing those threats (Almeida, 2018). Communities with more resource infrastructures are better able to resist threats (Edwards & McCarthy, 2018). Communities with denser populations and communication networks, pre-established civic organizations and institutions, and past collective action experiences are also better able to engage in stronger and lasting mobilizations to fend off threats than those communities that have fewer of these resources (Almeida, 2014, 2018; Cress & Snow, 2000). However, not all collective action requires a high degree of organization among prospective participants. With the advent of new social media, mobilization can be achieved through free communication online, and solidarity and networks among participants can be formed and strengthened after collective action has occurred.

This study shows that threat can both trigger and sustain social movements. When a threat arises and causes severe concerns among a large segment of population, a consensus can be reached on the need for action. The free rider problem can be addressed simply because a lack of participation and thereby collective action means a loss of interests or rights. Threat sustains collective action in that the target of the action takes actions that verify or strengthen the perceived threat faced by the participants. For example, when the government represses collective action triggered by the threat imposed by the government, the repression confirms and strengthens the belief of participants in the threat. As a result, the government prompts the people to continue with their resistance until a high level of repression is applied if concessions are

impossible. The government becomes untrustworthy as long as it fails to meet the core demands of the participants. This distrust can help sustain the movement.

Threat-triggered actions are reactive or defensive. In Hong Kong, political actions had occurred continuously from 1997 when sovereignty was returned to China. Many of these influential political actions were reactive to policies of the city government or Beijing. It was neither new nor unique that threats had triggered collective action in Hong Kong. For example, on October 28, 1977, about 2,000 police officers marched to the police headquarters, protesting against the Independent Commission Against Corruption that was to investigate police corruption. Yet, threat-triggered political actions seemed to be more frequent and influential in the city after 1997. These actions reveal the difficulties faced by Hong Kong residents in pursuing and defending their political rights within the existing political framework. This study examines the AEB movement that lasted for about a year, explaining how threats to the political freedoms of Hong Kong residents triggered and sustained social movements. It also shows how the movement shaped the relationship between Hong Kong residents and Beijing.

## **Popular Contention and Political Participation in Hong Kong**

Non-institutionalized modes of action such as protests or social movements are usually considered an option by social groups that are “excluded or marginalized in the political order” (Jenkins, 1995). Precisely because these groups lack power and resources, their success is often highly conditional on whether they are able to receive support either from the elite or other external parties. The protests of weak groups can also be expressive when they call attention to their grievances. Similar to people elsewhere, Hong Kong people staged collective action both to send a message and to aim for changes. After the handover in 1997, mass protests had been an important mode of political participation in the city, where demonstrations were allowed.

Residents in Hong Kong staged collective action for both political and economic grievances. One annual demonstration had been mobilized every July 1 from 1997 (Ngo, 2013). The issues that protestors complained about were multiple and had varied over the years. However, the demonstrations had always had democracy and political rights as a consistent theme (Cheng, 2005; Lee & Chan, 2011). The demand for real elections and the abolition of functional constituencies had been the constant themes proposed by the organizers (i.e., the Civic Human Rights Front). Moreover, protestors had also demanded the resignation of all Chief Executives.

For example, organizers raised three to four political demands each year between 2011 and 2014 that included democracy, universal suffrage, and the abolition of functional constituencies. Participants made many other claims as well, ranging from 10 to over 20. Grievances included a worsening free press, the Chinese government's repression of political dissidents, the selective law enforcement of the police, the government's developmental plans, collective bargaining, gay rights, the hegemony of real estate developers, increasing rent for small businesses, the babies of mainland mothers, a shortage of milk powder, and even Hong Kong independence. "On July 1 of every year, one reason is enough for a person to take to the streets. The reason can be dissatisfaction with the government, a declining quality of life, and low pay, among others" ("Shimin Suqiu," 2012). In recent demonstrations, demanding democracy became a constant theme in this annual undertaking.

Large-scale protests in Hong Kong were tied to the Chinese central government in one way or another after 1997. These protests were generally reactive in that the people felt that some of their rights were being weakened or removed because of policies made or supported by the central government. As prospect theory suggests, people tend to be more aggressive or risk taking when they face losses (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), and thus they are more likely to take risks to defend the things they currently possess. In other words, people are more likely to be mobilized to take defensive action because the perception of losses has a strong mobilization effect.

One important demonstration in Hong Kong after the handover was the opposition to the enactment of Article 23 of the Basic Law in 2003, which was considered to be "the most serious crisis of governance" in Hong Kong after the 1967 pro-communist riots against British colonial rule (Cheung, 2005; Lee & Chan, 2011). According to Article 23, the Hong Kong government shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the central government, or theft of state secrets; to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the city; and to prohibit political organizations of the city from establishing ties with foreign ones. On September 24, 2002, the Hong Kong government released its proposals for the anti-subversion law. The proposal was strongly opposed by a large number of people who believed that the law would seriously limit civil liberties in Hong Kong. As a result, an estimated number of 500,000 people took to the streets on July 1, 2003 to protest against the legislation of Article 23, the poor economy, and some other issues. In the aftermath of the mass protests, two Executive Committee members resigned, and the bill was withdrawn after it became clear that it would not obtain sufficient support. This protest "also

encouraged local participation, refueled an ailing democracy movement, and put democratic reforms onto the political agenda of Hong Kong” (Ma, 2005).

Before the AEB Movement, the longest social movement in Hong Kong was the anti-national education protest that lasted for several months (Sing, 2020). On October 13, 2010, the Hong Kong government decided that the existing moral and civic education would be replaced with strengthened moral and national education. The government planned to introduce the new subject in primary schools in 2012 and in secondary schools in 2013, carrying out a four-month consultation in 2011. However, this decision was controversial from the beginning. The textbook for national education was written by scholars from the mainland and gave the impression to the people that the course was designed to praise the communist and nationalist ideology of the Chinese communist government on the one hand and to condemn democracy on the other. Not surprisingly, the decision was viewed as an attempt at brainwashing and was strongly opposed by students and several other social groups. The opposition movement lasted for about five months from May 13 to September 9, 2012, when the government decided to suspend and then give up the plan.

Similar to the July 1 demonstrations, this movement received support from a number of social groups. After the movement started, 23 organizations that included Scholarism, the Parents’ Concern Group, and the Hong Kong Professional Teacher’s Union formed the Civil Alliance against National Education (Sing, 2020). While an important role was played by Scholarism, a student organization formed in 2011, other groups helped increase the scale and momentum of the movement. For example, the protest on May 13 was orchestrated by 13 organizations, including democratic parties, student organizations, and even environmental groups. The rally on September 11 received the support of 188 student organizations.

An important consequence of these protests over the years is that they had helped citizens gain experience in participating in collective action. As Lee and Chan (2011) write, the demonstrations on July 1, 2003 had a significant impact on some of the participants. “They felt empowered by the experience and started to pay more attention to politics. They are attentive analysts of public affairs, and some of them have even become activists” (Lee & Chan, 2011, p. 181). For example, a survey of 1,562 people at the three protest sites between October 20 and October 26 during the Occupy Movement in 2014 shows that 85% of them had participated in protests or demonstrations before the movement (Cheng & Yuen, 2014). Among these people, 84% once participated in the annual July 1 demonstration, and 63% had participated in the Anti-National Education Movement.

Unlike the aforementioned collective actions, the Umbrella Movement from September 26 to December 15, 2014 was largely a proactive action in the sense that the residents sought direct elections for the chief executive and legislators that had not previously existed. This movement failed to achieve its goal of direct elections, but it had a significant impact on the relationship between the residents and the city government and Beijing. The movement deepened distrust between Beijing and many Hong Kong residents, especially younger ones. Beijing has thus tried to strengthen its control over the city. When the AEB Movement started, violent confrontations between protestors and the police became unprecedented in the city. These confrontations reflect the uncompromising attitude of Beijing, whose distrust of the defying residents in the city eventually led to the enactment of the National Security Law in May 2020.

### **The Anti-Extradition-Bill Movement**

The AEB Movement occurred in a politically repressed environment in which Beijing had been intensifying its control over the city. In 2017, six of the 15 accused pan-democracy legislators were disqualified, significantly undermining opposition forces in the legislative organ. In April 2019, nine leaders and activists of the 2014 Umbrella Movement were all declared guilty by the court, with four being jailed right after the rulings were made. According to Reporters Without Borders, Hong Kong's Press Freedom Index declined from 48th in 2009 to 73rd among more than 180 countries of the world. Against this backdrop, the extradition bill was widely perceived as a threat to the political freedom of Hong Kong residents.

The AEB Movement is an unprecedented one in Hong Kong in terms of its scale and momentum. Unlike the Umbrella Movement that had recognizable coordinators and organizations, the AEB movement was mobilized without such people or organizations. Like the Umbrella Movement (Lee & Chan, 2018), however, the AEB Movement relied heavily on social media for mobilization and on the voluntary participation of residents. A survey of 309 participants in the demonstrations on July 1 showed that 55% reported that Lihkg.com was the most influential media in the movement, followed by Facebook (i.e., 19%) (Guan, 2019). In the face of this threat to the city, the AEB Movement gained wide participation from people from all walks of life.

### **The Extradition Bill as a Threat**

The AEB Movement was triggered by an extradition bill that originated from a murder case in Taiwan. In February 2018, a 20-year-old student surnamed Chan was



traveling in Taiwan with his 19-year-old girlfriend. Both of them were from Hong Kong. When Chan learned that his girlfriend was pregnant with another man's child, Chan strangled her, stuffed her body in a suitcase and dumped it in a thicket of bushes near a Mass Rapid Transit station in New Taipei City. Chan then escaped back to Hong Kong. When the Taiwanese government sought Chan's extradition, it failed because of a lack of an extradition arrangement between the two places. A bill was then proposed by the Hong Kong government in February 2019 to request the surrender of Chan. However, the government proposed to establish a mechanism for transfers of fugitives not only for Taiwan, but also for mainland China and Macau.

Were the bill to pass, four types of people could be extradited to mainland China: (1) mainlanders who commit crimes in the mainland and escape to Hong Kong; (2) Hong Kong residents who commit crimes in the mainland and return to Hong Kong; (3) Hong Kong residents who commit certain crimes in Hong Kong; and (4) Chinese or foreign people who have committed certain crimes outside China and live in Hong Kong (Huang, 2019). Critics of the bill worried about arbitrary detentions, unfair trials, and torture under China's judicial system. Some lawyers in Hong Kong believed that the extradition law would "put anyone in Hong Kong doing work related to the mainland at risk. . . No one will be safe, including activists, human rights lawyers, journalists, and social workers" (Li, 2019).

The extradition bill worried Hong Kong residents because the legal system in mainland China is widely perceived to be heavily controlled by the Party-state. On July 9, 2015, the Chinese government coordinated a move that targeted legal professionals who defended citizens fighting for their rights. Police departments arrested about 300 human rights lawyers, legal assistants, and activists across the country. Most of these people were then released, but Wang Quanzhang, one of the arrested lawyers, was not tried until 2019 when he was sentenced to four and a half years in jail for the subversion of state power. The actual reason behind his imprisonment was that he defended political activists, victims of land seizures, and members of the banned religious group "Falun Gong" (Lau, 2019).

There have been repeated reports on injustices encountered by Chinese citizens, and Beijing's certain practices only worsened this fear among residents of Hong Kong. One well-known case that reveals the problems with the legal system in China is the Causeway Bay Books event. Between October and December 2015, five associates of the Causeway Bay Books and Mighty Current Publishing house vanished one after another from Thailand, Hong Kong, and mainland China. Their unexplained disappearances sparked fears that they had been taken away by Chinese agents because of their publications that were critical of the Chinese leadership. One of them was last

seen in Hong Kong and eventually revealed to be across the border in Shenzhen without the travel documents necessary to cross the border through legal channels. All five people later reappeared in custody in mainland China and were investigated for their “illegal business” of delivering about 4,000 banned books from Hong Kong to 380 customers across the border since October 2014 (Su, 2018).

In 2017, the disappearance of Xiao Jianhua, a mysterious Chinese tycoon, triggered more concerns over security in Hong Kong after the disappearance of the five book sellers. The financier Xiao was the founder of the Beijing-based Tomorrow Group and was believed to have been involved in illegal businesses. Xiao had been staying for long term in Hong Kong’s Four Seasons luxury hotel. On January 27, five men arrived at the hotel in two vans and took Xiao from his room. About 12 h later, Xiao passed through border controls at the Lok Ma Chau border crossing between Hong Kong and Shenzhen and disappeared into the mainland Chinese city (Zhou & Xie, 2018).

Both the media in Hong Kong and social media in general had long reported various problems with the legal system in the mainland such as a lack of independence and transparency, the abuse of power, and corruption. Because of these events and media reports, Hong Kong residents came to believe that passage of the bill would threaten their freedom and safety. The city’s proximity to the mainland made people believe this to be a credible threat. As the business sector became worried about a possible abuse of charges against them, the government made concessions by removing nine crimes from the bill that were related to bankruptcy, the drafting of company charters, securities and futures, property rights, environmental protection regulations, money transfers, computers, and tariffs. However, this compromise did not ease the worry of other residents.

On May 9, the Taiwanese government cancelled the extradition of Chan because the extradition bill would also threaten Taiwanese citizens who traveling to or residing in Hong Kong (“Luweihui,” 2019). In addition, the government’s explanations of the bill failed to ease public concerns in Hong Kong. According to a survey of more than 1,048 residents conducted from May 23 to June 5 in Hong Kong, nearly 58% paid close or very close attention to the extradition bill issue, and 31.3% paid some attention. About 58% disagreed or strongly disagreed that extradited people would be fairly tried in the mainland. More than 47% opposed or strongly opposed the legislation of the bill, whereas less than 24% supported or strongly supported it (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2019a).

Against this background, residents reached a consensus on resistance. On June 9, 2019 one million people reportedly took to the streets to protest against the extradition

bill and demand that the government withdraw it, beginning the massive participation in the AEB Movement. However, the city government refused to compromise. Instead, the police confronted the protestors and employed an unprecedented level of force. As a result, other grievances arose because of the government's irresponsiveness and repression. Participants then raised five demands: (1) a complete withdrawal of the bill, (2) the withdrawal of the characterization of June 12 protests as "riots," (3) the unconditional release of all arrested protestors, (4) an independent inquiry into police behavior, and (5) universal suffrage that replaced an early demand requiring Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive, to step down.

The uncompromising attitude of the Hong Kong government and Beijing as well as police repression both provoked more actions and strengthened worries about the future of the city, giving rise to more grievances among many of the local residents, especially younger generations. Consequently, some of them became stalwart participants and comprised the critical mass that staged repeated collective actions and sustained the movement. One female participant said on June 9 that if the people of Hong Kong stood up and fought, the city might maintain its status for another 10 years; but if they did not, "Hong Kong will be finished in two to three years" (Zhao, 2019). These concerns were shared by many others who became the movement's participants (Lee, Yuen, Tang, & Cheng, 2019).

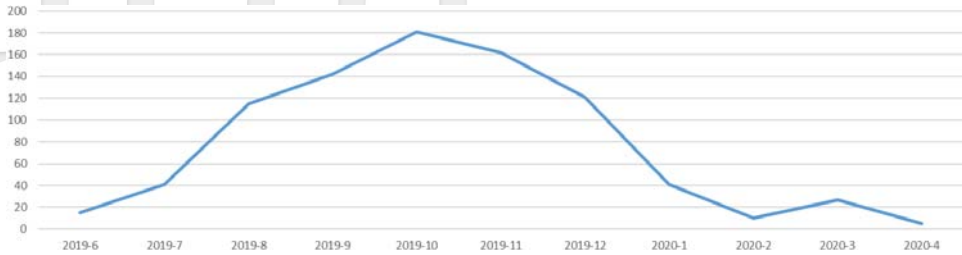
### **Belief Confirming**

The AEB movement was directly triggered by a threat posed by a bill that was perceived to deprive residents of the city of their political freedoms, but the response of the government and the police sustained it. From June 2019 to January 2020, about 1,000 collective actions of varying size occurred in the city. As Figure 1 shows, the momentum began to decline in November 2019.<sup>1</sup> Because of a combination of factors such as government repression, government concessions, and the outbreak of COVID-19, collective actions became less frequent in 2020. The movement was a partial success as the government eventually withdrew the bill, though it refused to make more concessions. As mentioned above, however, the movement deepened the distrust between Beijing and the residents of the city.

While mass participation was able to put some pressure on the city government, the latter was reluctant to make concessions. When it finally did, it chose to postpone

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<sup>1</sup>The cases were collected from the following sources: <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/反對逃犯條例修訂草案運動公眾行動列表>; *Mingpao*; *Apple Daily*; *SingTao*; and *Oriental Daily* (from May 2019 to April 2020).



Source: Author's collection.

Figure 1. Collective actions in the AEB Movement by month (2019–2020).

the bill until June 15 and later declared it “dead” on July 9. After nearly three months of protest, the government eventually withdrew the bill entirely on September 4, probably to pacify protestors during National Day on October 1. However, these concessions failed to stop the movement because participants and their supporters believed that the cost paid by the participants was too high and that the city government and Beijing were not trustworthy.

### *Repression*

The city government and Beijing rejected most of the demands raised by movement participants and attempted to contain it primarily through the use of threats and repression. On July 24, a spokesman of China's Ministry of Defense denounced the behavior of radical protesters as challenging Beijing's authority and violating its bottom-line principle of “one country, two systems” and warned that the People's Liberation Army could legally intervene to help “maintain social order” if requested by the Hong Kong government (Meyers, 2019). On July 31, the Chinese military commander responsible for Hong Kong warned that violent clashes would not be tolerated and that the army was determined to protect China's sovereignty (Ng & Su, 2019).

In addition to deploying military forces in neighboring Shenzhen, the Chinese government conducted repeated police drills in Guangdong province. On August 6 in Shenzhen, more than 12,000 armed police were mobilized to participate in a drill in the name of fighting against terrorists and rioters (“Shenzun,” 2019). Police officers from the mainland were believed to have joined the Hong Kong police to deal with protestors (“66% Ren,” 2019). Unprecedented force was used by the police to contain and stop the protests. Thousands of protestors were arrested, and hundreds faced criminal charges before the movement ended. The repression culminated on October 1 when a police officer shot an 18-year-old high-school student in his chest. Three days

later on October 4, a plainclothes police officer shot another 14-year-old student in the leg. On the same day, the Hong Kong government announced that a law that would ban protestors from wearing masks would be enforced from October 5.

The police arrested 6,022 people aged from 11 to 84 from June to December 9. These included 1,548 females (25.7%) and 2,393 students (39.7%), and 956 faced legal charges. In addition, the police fired nearly 16,000 rounds of teargas canisters, 10,000 rubber bullets, 2,000 bean bag rounds, and 1,860 sponge grenades (“Gongju 6022,” 2019). More than 2,600 people, including 470 police officers, were sent to hospitals from June to November 16 (“Jingfang Shiwei,” 2019). Some other injured protestors did not go to hospitals for fear of being arrested (Chen, 2019). The police had reportedly insulted, harassed, beaten, and injured protestors when the latter were arrested or detained (“7 Shiweizhe,” 2019). They were also rumored to have raped and murdered participants (“Chuan Taizizhan,” 2019). In addition to opening fire on participants, the police were deemed responsible for a series of shocking events that victimized both movement participants and bystanders such as MTR passengers.

### *Public Perception*

Police repression confirmed the belief of movement supporters in the illegitimacy of the police, the city government, and Beijing. It also made the participants believe that the movement might be their last chance to defend their political freedoms. A survey of 1,007 people in July found that among the group aged between 14 and 29, the most important factor causing their grievances was the central government’s unwillingness to compromise, followed by “distrust of ‘one country, two systems’” (86%) and “distrust of the chief executive” (84%). The primary cause was described as “young people’s resentment, 90% do not trust the central government” (“Nianqingren,” 2019).

Many surveys showed that the public’s trust in the police and government declined dramatically as the movement lasted. This distrust also created an environment conducive to the sustaining of the movement because a large segment of the population was sympathetic to it. A survey of 623 people in September showed that nearly 72% reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that the police had used excessive force. The survey also surveyed people’s trust of the police, which was measured by scores ranging from “0” (i.e., no trust) to “10” (i.e., full trust). Approximately 48% reported having “zero” trust in the police (“Linzheng Sizhao,” 2019). Medical staff who treated injured protestors had repeatedly signed statements and staged gatherings to condemn the police. On August 26, 750 medical staff collectively signed a statement condemning the police for their disregard for the life of protestors, saying “the

police's abusive behaviors were too numerous to record" (Zhang, 2019). Thus, the public's approval rate for the police had declined significantly as the movement persisted.

Public perceptions of an illegitimate government and the police led to their tolerance for radical actions or even violence on the part of protestors. Movement supporters tolerated aggressive and radical protestors also because they believed that radical actions helped the cause. In retrospect, the storming of the Legislative Council on June 12 proved to be crucial in forcing the Council to cancel the meeting discussing the bill, paving the way for government concessions. Second, supporters believed that the police and government were worthy of blame than aggressive protestors. According to a survey of 858 people between December 12 and 14, most people believed that the escalation of violence in the city should be attributed to the government and police. About 84% said that the government should be responsible, 74 said the police, and 41 said the protestors (Table 1). More than 48% of those surveyed assigned a "0" to the performance of the police (i.e., the range is 0 to 10), when only 6.5% had assigned a "0" in an early survey in May. Nearly 72% agreed or strongly agreed that the police had used excessive force.

A research team from four local universities conducted a series of surveys of movement participants in major demonstrations from June 9 to August 4. The surveys included the statement, "If the government continues to ignore public demands, protestors' use of violence is understandable." The survey on June 16 showed that 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This rose to 83.5% on July 1 and exceeded 90% in the surveys on July 21, July 27, and August 4 (Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2019b).

Another survey of 1,072 people from October 17 to 21 mentioned above showed that 62% believed that the Hong Kong police were joined by police or armed forces

Table 1.  
*Who Should be Responsible for the Escalation of Violence?*

	Government	Police	Protestors
Big responsibility	73	58	25
Relatively big	11	16	16
Average	8	10	22
Relatively small	3	4	14
Minor	3	8	22

*Source:* Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (2019).

from mainland China who showed little mercy to movement participants. As a result, some participants used to be intolerant of violence, but they ceased to be “non-violence upholder” (*fei baoli jiepi*) (Luo, 2020). The Civil Human Rights Front urged citizens to “side with those who can only throw eggs” (Lin & Xu, 2019), claiming that the political system was more violent than radical protestors and that they would not abandon radical protestors. Others claimed that the good will of protesters in protecting Hong Kong should not be questioned. Radical protestors succeeded in preventing the second reading of the bill and legislation. While they caused damage, they were not seen as rioters (Lin & Xu, 2019). A survey of 751 people between October 8 and 14 found that 51.5% had zero trust in the police, 69% believed that the police should be reorganized, and 88% agreed to an independent investigation of the police (“Yu Ban Shimin,” 2019).

Against this background, medical staff, the elderly, parents, and other groups took collective action to show their support for young protestors. Six thousand mothers staged a demonstration on June 15 to condemn the police and the government for their repressing protestors on June 12. These mothers claimed that they did not want to be “Tiananmen mothers.” A 74-year-old woman reported that it was her first time to participate in a gathering. On June 12, she was shocked to see the police beating unarmed young people: “I did not see riots, and I only saw the tyrant and a tyranny” (“6000 Xianggang Mama,” 2019). She accused the government for forcing innocent students to rebel.

Government repression only intensified the public’s distrust because they believed that there was no guarantee that the government would not resume its rights-violating policies in the future. In other words, the people still lacked a fundamental solution — such as direct elections — to constrain the government or remove the threat. This became an important reason for movement supporters to continue pressuring the government. Movement participants also believed that they had paid a high cost for the movement in that some people died, some were arrested, and many more were injured by the police. For these reasons, the government withdrawing the bill failed to stop the movement.

A message on Lihkg.com — an important online platform used by movement participants — stated that there are great differences between a withdrawal on June 9 and the one on September 4. The message stated that the late withdrawal came with great costs: three people were hurt in their eyes; there were two attacks on people on the trains; two people had their hands cut; eight people lost their lives; more than 1,000 people were arrested; and more than 100 sued. Other losses included widespread casualties, violence and abuse of power, unfounded arrests and charges, collusion with

gangsters, and violations of freedom of the press (Lihkg.com, 2019). A survey of 623 people from September 5 to 11 found that 76% reported that the withdrawal of the bill alone was inadequate, and nearly 71% believed that an independent investigation of the police would be the minimum acceptable concession (“Linzheng Sizhao,” 2019).

### **Outcome of Popular Contention in Hong Kong**

The outcome of collective action is often determined by multiple factors, including the type of political system. Hong Kong is not an authoritarian regime, but it is subject to an authoritarian government in mainland China. In authoritarian regimes like China, the success of collective action is suggested to be determined by two broad sets of factors: the type of demands of the participants and the forcefulness of their action often measured in terms of the scope of participation (Cai, 2010). The Chinese government is more likely to make concessions in economic disputes than in political ones. For example, local governments in China have made concessions to social groups like workers and peasants who staged actions in pursuit of their economic interests (Cai, 2010; Lee & Zhang, 2013). Yet the government has repressed actions deemed as political challenges like the Tiananmen Movement and those staged by Falun Gong.

Indeed, the Chinese Party-state as has become more repressive in recent years. Participants in collective action in China have been more likely to be arrested in the Xi administration than in earlier administrations. A study on collective action in China found that about 24% of collective actions from 2000 to 2002 (i.e., the Jiang Zemin administration) involved the arrest of participants. This rose to 27.4% from 2003 to 2012 (i.e., the Hu Jintao administration) and to 39% from 2013 to 2017 (i.e., the first term of the Xi administration) (Chen & Cai, in press). The Xi administration has also taken a hardline approach in its handling of issues in Xinjiang.

Beijing’s governance style has also been reflected in its interaction with Hong Kong. Since Xi came to power, the government has tried to tighten its control over the city. The Hong Kong government and Beijing had made concessions in response to political actions that involved wide-scale participation in Hong Kong in the past, such as the massive demonstrations in July 2003 and the Anti-National-Education Movement in 2012. However, the government made no concessions in the Umbrella Movement in 2014. In the AEB Movement, the government withdrew the bill while refusing to accept any of the remaining four demands and employed unprecedented repression to deal with the participants.



Table 2.  
*Movement Outcomes in Hong Kong*

Type of claims	Policy Initiator	
	Beijing	Hong Kong
Proactive	1. Occupy Movement (2014)	2. 2010 election reform package
Reactive	3. National Security Law (2020)	4.a. July 1, 2003 demonstration b. Anti-Express Railway movement (2010) c. Anti-National Education (2012) d. Anti-Extradition Bill (2019–2020)

Source: Author’s summary.

As Table 2 shows, the outcome of influential collective actions in Hong Kong is significantly affected by two types of factors: the type of claims and the policy initiator. The claims of protestors can be divided into reactive and proactive types. Reactive claims are those that aim to defend existing rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Proactive claims are seeking of rights that protestors have not obtained, such as political freedoms and direct elections. Policy initiators are also divided into two: The Hong Kong government and Beijing or the central government. Certainly, any important policy proposed by the city government must be either approved or initiated by Beijing. If a policy is proposed by the city government, it leaves room for the central government to handle the case. As the table shows, protestors were more likely to succeed when they made defensive claims against the city government (Cell 4). However, when Beijing was the policy initiator, protestors failed regardless of the type of their claims (Cells 1 and 3).

There have not been any influential collective actions that fall into Cell 2. One possible reason could be that before 2010, political distrust between Hong Kong residents and the two governments had not deteriorated to the extent that city residents and pan-democracy legislators decided to make proactive demands. Indeed, the election reform package proposed by the city government in 2010 was accepted by pan-democracy legislators. Since 2010, however both Beijing and the government of Hong Kong have aimed to increase government influence and control over the city. A series of threatening policies were made, triggering defensive actions (i.e., Cells 3 and 4).

Beijing faces limited constraints when it comes to dealing with Hong Kong matters directly. In the face of recurrent social movements in Hong Kong, Beijing eventually decided to exercise direct control over by bypassing the Basic Law in 2020. In early 2020, the Liaison Office of the Central Party in Beijing and pro-government

media began to propose a Subversion Law based on Article 23 of the Basic Law. In May 2020, Beijing decided to enact the National Security Law by bypassing the Legislative Council in Hong Kong to impose direct control over the city despite opposition from Hong Kong residents and the international community. This law, which took effect from July 1, 2020, signals the fast ending of “one country, two systems” in Hong Kong as well as the diminishing or disappearance of political opportunities for social movements in the city.

## Conclusion

Hong Kong has become a city of protests in the past two decades, the largest of which are reactive or defensive in nature. This feature reveals the political system that limits the effective political participation on the part of its citizens. The most effective and inexpensive way of protecting one’s interests is to prevent encroachment from occurring rather than address it *ex post*. Without direct elections of the chief executive and many of their legislators, Hong Kong residents have rather limited influence in the city’s policy making, and practically no influence in Beijing. As a result, popular contention has become a major mode of political participation in Hong Kong when the people feel a threat from the government.

Literature on social movements and collective action has pointed out the mobilization effect of threat (Tilly, 1978, p. 134–135). Threats can take different forms, including political, economic, and demographic ones (Van Dyke & Soule, 2002). Based on his research of protest events in El Salvador between 1962 and 1981, Almeida (2003) suggests three principal threats that apply to authoritarian states: state-attributed economic problems, the erosion of rights, and state repression. In the El Salvador case, protests occurred first because of the rise of political opportunity in the form of institutional access and competitive elections, and then because of threat environments (Almeida, 2003).

The case of Hong Kong demonstrates the influence of threat on the occurrence and sustaining of collective action. Threats trigger collective action because they have a strong power to mobilize. Individuals are considered to be risk taking when they face losses (Scott, 1976). This paper also explores the issue of how threats help sustain collective action. It suggests that coercion applied by authorities to movement participants enhances the latter’s distrust of the former. In other words, repression confirms the belief of participants in the threat presented by the policies of the authorities and motivates them to sustain the movement in order to seek a more fundamental solution

to the threat. Thus, popular contention is sustained not only because the protestors lack alternative modes of resistance but also because they feel a stronger need for action.

However, defensive action is only conditionally effective. While some large-scale collective actions in Hong Kong achieved success in the past, the effectiveness of such actions seems to have declined in recent years. Instead, the Hong Kong government and Beijing have become increasingly intolerant of political action. In the AEB Movement, both the police and protestors used unprecedented means. Such confrontations only deepened the distrust between movement supporters and Beijing and motivated the latter to strengthen its control over the city. Thus, the consequences of these social movements may not be what the movement participants and the two governments expected. In other words, social movements may produce unintended consequences. The National Security Law enacted in 2020 has begun to produce a profound impact on the future of Hong Kong, speeding up its political and economic integration into the mainland.

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