Chapter 7
Elephants Versus Termites: Lessons from Hong Kong

In the early stage of the "Anti-Patriotic Education Movement," a high-ranking government official answered a reporter's query about a condition under which the government would shelve the controversial national education curriculum. "When the elephant reveals itself to the government," said he half-jokingly. The government official used "elephant" as a metaphor for public discontent, suggesting that the government would drop the curriculum when a sufficient number of people voice their opposition to it. Since then, the organizers of the movement have made the elephant as the movement's mascot, in hopes of bringing out more protesters to humble the government. Eva Chan, one of the movement's organizers, draws an analogy between the parent activists and elephants: peaceful and moderate, but when they unleash their power, no one is able to stop them.[1]

The elephant metaphor is relevant not only to the "Anti-Patriotic Education Movement" but also to the prodemocracy movement of postcolonial Hong Kong, which is characterized by a panoply of demonstrations and protest activities. Occasionally, the protests are able to unleash great political power to force the government to back down on a certain policy. This Hong Kong-style prodemocracy movement is made possible by the high degree of civil liberties provided by the Basic Law, the mini-constitution of Hong Kong. Liberal-minded social activists and prodemocracy parties can freely air their discontent with the HKSAR government and Beijing. They can also take advantage of the freedom of assembly to organize mass protests against government authorities. One of the most remarkable examples is the July 1, 2003 protest, in which half a million people took to the streets to call for the resignation of the then Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, and the suspension of the controversial legislation of national security laws. The protest was successful, for it did halt the legislation. Later Tung also stepped down before finishing his second term.

[1]See Eva Chan's speech delivered in a mass protest on September 1, 2012. Retrieved May 22, 2014, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbkbvyK9thk

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The success of the July 1, 2003 protest has left a far-reaching impact on Hong Kong's prodemocracy movement, for it showed that public protests are able to bring about immediate political changes, as long as the turnout is large enough. Many come to see protests as a viable means in the struggle for democracy. Consequently, since 2003, Hong Kong has witnessed a proliferation of mass demonstrations as liberal social activists and politicians alike attempt to use street protests to draw support and to advance their causes. Behind their effort is a hope that, at some point, they can call out enlightened masses to demonstrate the people's power once again and shock the government in the same way as the July 1, 2003 protest did, so that they can effect immediate policy change or even tear down the authoritarian edifice in one fell swoop.

Against this background, civil society in Hong Kong has grown vibrantly. In addition to the ritualistic annual July 1 protest, various large-scale social movements have appeared since 2003. Liberal social activists have also become increasingly receptive to the use of a confrontation approach in pressing for changes. In politics, radical opposition parties have emerged and become significant political players. Riding the wave of contentious politics, the elected members of these parties have constantly updated their "repertoires of contention," including filibuster and object throwing, that aim to disrupt legislative sessions. Some opposition parties also made use of mass mobilization to drum up political support, as evidenced by the occurrence of the 2010 quasi-referendum movement.

All these protest activities and political brawls have created noise, as they have dominated media coverage. While media exposure of this kind may have served the individual groups involved well, it has serious repercussions for the entire prodemocracy movement for two reasons. First, dependence on this noisemaking strategy has intensified the internal strife between opposition parties. This is not only because the media are more interested in exploiting the internal conflicts among the prodemocracy elite but also because radical parties find it more effective to shore up political support by assailing their allies' ideological stance, rather than the establishment's. The internal strife has prevented the pan-democrats from coalescing into a unifying force to fight for democratization against Beijing and hence has undermined their collective bargaining power.

The second reason why the prodemocracy movement fails to benefit from the noisemaking tactics is that these political confrontations have alienated moderate voters, who also represent a large segment, if not the majority, of the supporters for the movement. On the one hand, the moderate voters cannot identify themselves with the antagonistic approach of the radical wing of the prodemocracy movement. On the other hand, they have been bombarded with inflammatory ideological criticisms of the moderate opposition parties, who have been often depicted as a conspirator for Beijing or as its running dog. Even if moderate voters still have trust in these parties' political integrity, they may lose faith in these parties' ability to lead, or even represent, the movement. Feeling demoralized and frustrated, some moderate voters lose passion for the cause, while others may be attracted instead to moderate pro-establishment parties. Ironically, this kind of parochial political disputes over ideological purity is all too familiar to Hong Kong's "leftists." They

have a name for it: left-leaning adventurism, which is considered by the CCP as a serious strategic mistake because the outcome of such disputes is inevitable alienation of supporters of the cause. It was the very mistake for which the "leftist" elite in Hong Kong paid a dear price in the 1967 Leftist Riots.

If the prodemocracy movement in postcolonial Hong Kong can be symbolically represented by an elephant, the living organism that would best characterize Beijing-sponsored parties is termites. The image of termites is the polar opposite of that of elephants just as the strategic differences are between the two political camps. While loud, bulky, and conspicuous street protests have epitomized the struggle of the pan-democrats, the strategies of Beijing-sponsored parties have been much more quiet, subtle, and barely visible.[2] They have focused on enlarging their social support base by building a united front at the grassroots level. They have invested a great deal of resources in training an army of political brokers, whose main duty is to deliver labor-intensive constituency services. Mundane as they are, these constituency services have helped Beijing-sponsored parties penetrate into local communities and forge a close relationship with the residents. This kind of community engagement is also less controversial and hence less likely to be challenged by the opposition on ideological grounds.

The July 1, 2003 protest did not derail Beijing-sponsored parties' long-term strategic plan. On the contrary, the historic protest has only entrenched it. In one interview, a DAB party official makes a sobering analogy, "We have been building a dam. After 2003, we redoubled our efforts to consolidate it. Now our dam is at least twice as high as before."[3] Their efforts have paid off handsomely, as Beijing-sponsored parties, or the pro-establishment camp in general, have nibbled away at the pan-democrats' local support networks, culminating into its current domination of the District Councils, the lowest elected tier of Hong Kong. Beijing-sponsored parties' ambition, of course, goes beyond the District Councils. The ultimate goal for them is to marginalize the pan-democrats in the legislature, if not also in society. Or, at the very least, the dam that they have built should be able to protect them from another political tsunami akin to the July 1, 2003 protest.

A test came in 2012. The "Anti-Patriotic Education Movement" was the largest social mobilization since the July 1, 2003 protest. The organizers did bring out the "elephant," that is, public opposition, to humble the government. The movement grew in the summer of 2012 and reached its zenith in early September, when the activists decided to camp out in the government headquarters, a move that attracted massive public support in the form of continual solidarity rallies. The timing coincided with the LegCo Election, which was scheduled to take place on

[2]Interestingly, the CCP had used the "termite" analogy in relation to its Hong Kong policy. For example, in 1955, Liao Chengzhi, the person-in-charge of Hong Kong Affairs in Beijing, gave advice to his fellow cadres who were stationed in Hong Kong: "[You] should make friends with all walks of life. Never say anything like 'you are a reactionary, centrist, and I am a leftist, communist.' Instead, you should never let your enemy know who you are and where you come from. We should do our work in the same way as termites" (Wang 2006, p. 537).

[3]Personal interview with a District Councillor on January 4, 2014 (Code: 12).

September 9. Bowing to public pressure, and possibly to electoral pressure as well, the government announced on the eve of the 2012 LegCo Election an indefinite suspension of the controversial curriculum. The government's acquiescence signaled the triumph of the movement. Prodemocracy supporters hoped that the momentum of the movement would carry over to the election to wipe out the pro-establishment camp. To their surprise, what happened on the next day was one of the opposition camp's worst electoral defeats.

"Our dam stood the test," so the DAB official says assuredly. Worried that I could not grapple with the precarious situation they were in, he added, "Do not forget that there were two additional tidal waves in 2012: the Li Wangyang Incident and the political rise of Leung Chun-ying. Our dam survived all these tsunamis." Indeed, the two incidents he mentioned had sparked off mass demonstrations in that year. For the first one, Li Wangyang was a Chinese human rights defender, who had served more than 20 years in prison for his participation in the 1989 student-led prodemocracy movement. Li was found dead in a hospital, shortly after he had an interview with a Hong Kong television station, during which he called for a vindication of the prodemocracy movement. The Chinese local authorities claimed that Li committed suicide, while many in Hong Kong believed it was a political homicide. Tens of thousands of people joined a public rally to call for an open and transparent investigation of his death. As for Leung Chun-ying, he was elected as Hong Kong's Chief Executive in 2012. Members of liberal civil society groups have a deep distrust of Leung because he is widely suspected to be an underground CCP member. On the day of his inauguration, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against his rule.

The Beijing-sponsored parties' grassroots strategy reflects their pragmatic approach to dealing with the pan-democrats. Their goal is crystal clear: to marginalize the prodemocracy opposition force. In order to achieve this goal, they are willing to put ideology aside. Their pragmatism has an ancestral root in the CCP's conception of realpolitik. In particular, the idea of the united front, which is considered by the CCP as one of the three keys to its political success (Mao 1952b, p. 7), underpins much of the Beijing-sponsored parties' strategic thinking. The essence of the united front tactic is to enlarge one's support base by co-opting even those with dissimilar ideologies in order to isolate and conquer one's enemy. Even if one cannot obtain the support of a co-optation target, one should seek to neutralize it, so that it would not become the enemy's ally.[4]

In the context of Hong Kong's situation, the "enemy" of Beijing-sponsored parties is the prodemocracy opposition elite, while the co-optation target is the swing voters, who are ideologically committed to neither the pan-democrats nor the Beijing-sponsored camp. Deng Xiaoping had long set the tone for the formation of the ruling coalition to govern Hong Kong: a few leftists, a few rightists, and better

[4]The united front tactic is succinctly summarized by Mao (1976) in a famous party motto: Unite the majority, attack the minority, exploit the enemies' contradictions, and conquer them one by one (tuanjie duoshu, daji shaoshu, liyong maodun, gege jipo).

with more centrists (Deng 2003, p. 74). His comment, which suggested that co-opting the centrists is key to consolidating Beijing's control of Hong Kong, offers an important working guideline for Beijing-sponsored parties after 1997.

How is Deng's guideline carried out in practice? Li Xiaohui (2010) provides by far the most detailed open discussion of the actual implementation of this guideline in Hong Kong. Li, who is the deputy editor-in-chief of *Wen Wei Po*, a Beijing-sponsored Hong Kong newspaper, argues that while only 30 % of the Hong Kong population fulfill the narrow criterion of "being patriotic to China and Hong Kong" (*aiguo aigang*),[5] centrist voters in Hong Kong, who constitute the majority of the populace, should not be excluded from the patriotic camp. These centrist voters, he explains, "have only moderate political demands, no obvious political leaning, and only care about the economy and livelihood" (Li 2010, p. 94). For this reason, Li argues that the pro-establishment camp should adopt a pragmatic and strategic approach to dealing with the centrist voters, namely, to actively seek their political support (Li 2010, pp. 97–98). He further points out that the centrist voters are the key to break the "60-40 rule," which is the general perception of the vote share ratio of opposition parties to pro-establishment parties in LegCo elections. If the middle 10 % desert the opposition, "the 60-40 rule will vanish once and for all" (Li 2010, p. 102).

The aforementioned strategic calculus has structured the grassroots strategy of Beijing-sponsored parties. In particular, their aggressive expansion at the District Council level aims to extend their support base to include those who "only care about the economy and livelihood." As discussed in the previous chapter, their major *tour de force* is to reach out their target constituents with diligent constituency services.

Two caveats are in order. First, although Li's account of the role of centrist voters seems highly instrumental, political shenanigans alone may not be able to completely explain the motives of pro-Beijing District Councillors when it comes to the actual delivery of constituency services. My interviews with many Beijing-sponsored District Councillors suggest that some of them do have a genuine concern for the well-being of their community, and over the years they have developed a deep bonding with the constituents they serve. One should not dismiss their effort as pure skullduggery. For some elderly people who live alone, for example, they have been visited more frequently by their District Councillors than by their own children. In this respect, the District Councillors' service is creating important social value, although their political parties may be driven primarily by ulterior political motives.

[5]Deng Xiaoping suggests that Hong Kong must be ruled by those who are "patriotic to China and Hong Kong." The definition of what it means to be patriotic has been a bone of contention in Hong Kong. Members of the prodemocracy opposition elite emphasize that they, too, fulfill this criterion, because they are patriotic to the country, though not to the CCP. To Beijing, however, "patriotic to China and Hong Kong" implies supporting the single-party regime in Beijing.

The second caveat is that although Beijing has enormous influences on Beijing-sponsored parties, obeying the instruction of Beijing alone may not be able to explain the success of Beijing-sponsored parties' grassroots strategy. Without these local parties' dutiful cooperation and the availability of ample resources, the grassroots strategy would never have achieved its intended effect. There are two reasons for their dutiful cooperation. The first is that many senior leaders of these parties had first-hand experience with the 1967 Leftist Riots. Fully aware of the devastating power of "left-leaning adventurism," they have become skeptical about political radicalism and hence receptive to a pragmatic grassroots approach. But the most important reason is that such a strategy makes eminently good sense with respect to party development. As predicted by my model presented in Chap. 2, in the presence of a liberal media environment, an authoritarian regime can still undermine opposition parties by building an effective spoil system. In the case of Hong Kong, Beijing has been constrained by the economic status of Hong Kong, which makes it costly to impose heavy media controls. Under such circumstances, a rational move is to develop an elaborate spoil system to strengthen Beijing's political support, while helping these parties veer away from confronting the opposition's attack on ideological grounds.

How can Hong Kong's protracted democratization experience as analyzed in the previous chapters contribute to our understanding of democratization? Extant studies argue that media freedom is conducive to democratic transitions for various reasons such as keeping citizens informed (Dahl 1971), making collective actions feasible (Roscigno and Danaher 2001), and exposing corrupt officials (Brunetti and Weder 2003). Given its exceptionally high degree of media freedom, which is an exogenous factor inherited from the late British colonial period, postcolonial Hong Kong provides a valuable case to test these previous theories. It turns out, however, that the effect of free media has fallen short of the theoretical expectations. No doubt the freedom of expression, of the press, and of publication as prescribed by the Basic Law has allowed Hong Kong citizens to effectively monitor the government. The freedom of assembly also enables the citizens to stage large-scale public demonstrations without fear of persecution. Simply put, the high degree of civil liberties has nurtured a vibrant civil society in postcolonial Hong Kong. But all these favorable factors do not seem to benefit the central pillar of the entire prodemocracy movement – the opposition parties. Not only do they fail to resolve internal conflicts and present a unified coalition to bargain with Beijing, they also have great difficulty sustaining their camp's electoral performance, as the pro-establishment camp has continued to gnaw away at the opposition's vote share and seat share in LegCo elections. So how come these opposition parties have failed to grow stronger in the presence of a liberal media environment?

The experience of pan-democratic parties in postcolonial Hong Kong suggests that media freedom is unlikely a sufficient condition for democratization. Whether media freedom is a necessary condition is still too early to judge, given that democratic transition is still under way. What is clear from the Hong Kong case

is that media freedom may actually bring negative impacts on opposition parties, if not also on the prodemocracy movement. The reason is fourfold:

1. Reduce Opposition Parties' Incentive to Develop Grassroots Organization
   When the media are free, they can serve as an effective mobilizing agent. The variety of social movements that have occurred in postcolonial Hong Kong attests this point. Newspapers, radio broadcasts, and social media have played an important role in promoting political participation. Traditionally, political parties reach out to supporters through grassroots party organizations. When political parties discover the media as an effective tool to rally support, their incentive to invest in such organizations would be weakened because the construction and maintenance of grassroots organizations are costly. However, the media are not able to completely replace the function of party organizations. For one thing, the media cannot build a close bond between political parties and potential supporters. Parties with weak grassroots organizations may not be able to sustain supporters' loyalty for long.
2. Marginalize Moderate Opposition Parties
   Even if the media are free from political censorship, they may not be free from market competition. Under keen competition, the media are pressured to report stories that are eye catching. Radical parties and activists have a comparative advantage in capturing media attention because they are prone to adopt an unconventional, if not controversial, approach to fight for their causes. As the experience of postcolonial Hong Kong shows, radical parties have gradually crowded out moderate parties with respect to media exposure, and the coverage of political news has been overwhelmed by confrontational street protests and inflammatory political bickering, especially those within the pan-democratic camp. In short, the media have helped the radical wing promote its interests, leaving the moderate opposition elite sidelined.
3. Demoralize the Prodemocracy Movement by Exposing Internal Strife within the Opposition Elite
   The media are inherently interested in exposing conflicts, because conflicts are dramatic and sensational. Conflicts between the prodemocracy elite are no exception. While exposing the internal strife among prodemocracy elite may make best-selling news stories, it does little to help the prodemocracy movement. On the contrary, when voters are bombarded with political mudslinging between the so-called democracy fighters, their support for the movement as a whole is likely to wane. After all, why would people want to replace the ruling elite with those who do not seem to be any more upright? Moderate prodemocracy voters are particularly susceptible to this kind of political cynicism because they are relatively less committed to the cause. However, it is precisely the moderate vote, which constitutes a large segment of the electorate that is necessary for the ouster of the authoritarian regime in the voting booth.

   The corrosive effect of the exposure to elite dissension is evident in the pan-democratic voters' waning trust in political parties and in the legislature. As may

be seen from Fig. 7.1, which is based on public opinion survey data provided by the Asian Barometer Survey, the percentage of pan-democratic voters who trust political parties fluctuate around 40 %. The figure reaches 36 %, its lowest point, in Wave 3, which was conducted in 2012. In contrast, the percentage of pro-establishment voters who trust political parties has consistently increased over time. Note also that pan-democratic voters used to be more likely to trust both political parties and the legislature than the pro-establishment voters. But in the latest survey, pro-establishment voters have overtaken their pan-democratic counterpart on both scores. In particular, the percentage of pan-democratic voters who trust the legislature has experienced a significant drop.

The problem of political distrust is sobering when we put Hong Kong in comparative perspective with other countries. Figure 7.2 displays similar trust data of selected countries from the Asian Barometer Survey, and what is striking is that public trust in political parties and in legislature is significantly lower in

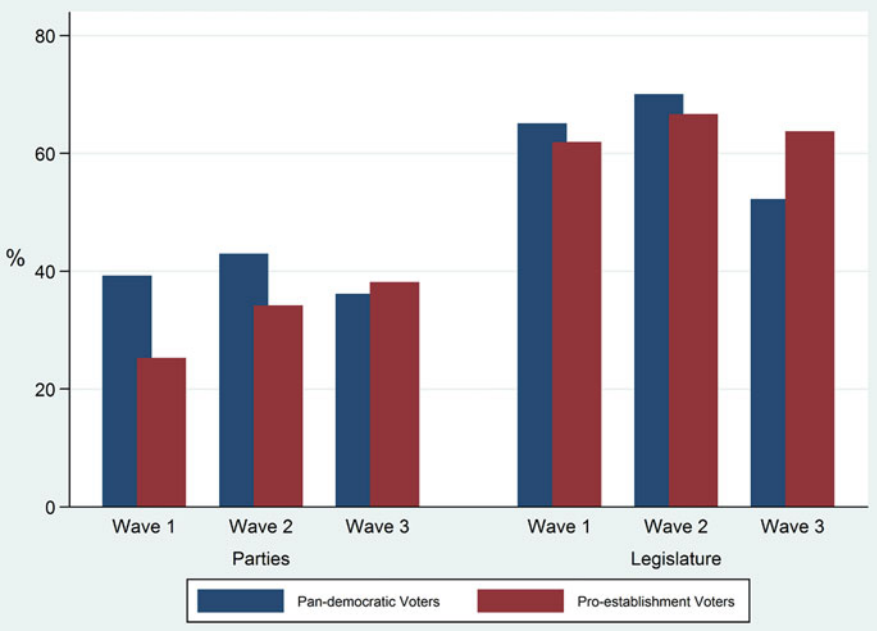

Fig. 7.1 Voters' trust in political parties and legislature by political camp. Notes: The Asian Barometer Survey provides data on public opinions about political values and governance. Three waves of survey have been conducted in about thirteen countries (including Hong Kong) since 2001. The "trust" data are constructed from a survey question that asks respondents to rate their trust in political parties (legislature): (1) none at all, (2) not very much trust, (3) quite a lot of trust, and (4) a great deal of trust. The *bars* in the figure indicate the percentage of people answering (3) and (4). The data on respondents' political affiliation are based on another survey question that asks respondents to identify a political party that they feel closest to (Source: Asian Barometer Survey, various waves)

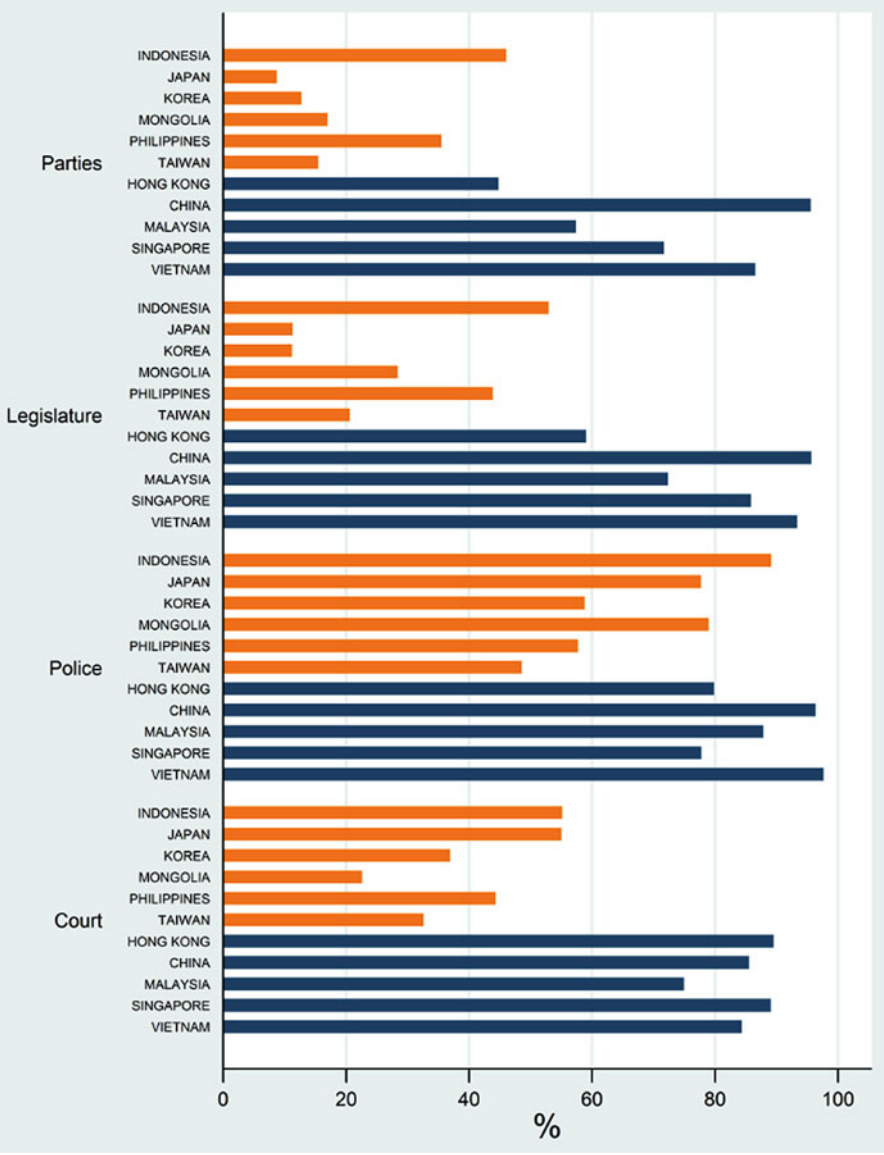

Fig. 7.2 Voters' trust in various political institutions by regime. Notes: The Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3 provides data on public opinions about political values and governance. The "trust" data are constructed from a survey question that asks respondents to rate their trust in the related institution: (1) none at all, (2) not very much trust, (3) quite a lot of trust, and (4) a great deal of trust. The *bars* in the figure indicate the percentage of people answering (3) and (4). Democracies are indicated by *orange bars*. The data on Hong Kong are pooled across political camps (Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3)

established democracies than in authoritarian regimes. We cannot rule out the possibility that the survey respondents of authoritarian regimes are lying due to political pressure. However, the key question here is not so much about why authoritarian regimes have high political trust, but why political trust is so low in established democracies, where respondents would not be punished by telling the truth. A plausible explanation, as proposed by Norris (1999), is that political institutions in established democracies fail to live up to democratic ideals, which renders citizens increasingly critical of their representative government. If this is the case, then Hong Kong as a non-democracy presents an interesting anomaly. As shown in the figure, although political distrust in Hong Kong is not as serious as in countries such as Japan and Korea, its trust level with respect to political parties and the legislature is lower than that of all the authoritarian regimes. Also, Hong Kong people find the police and the court more trustworthy than parties and the legislature. In short, Hong Kong people may have caught a mild "critical citizen" syndrome, even before they have attained democracy. For the sake of democratization, the premature exposure to the "critical citizen" syndrome may not be a welcoming sign. This is because in established democracies, whether voters approve of the performance of political parties is unlikely to change the fundamental political system. In non-democracies, however, opposition parties play an important role in negotiating democratization with the authoritarian incumbent. If these parties fail to obtain the people's basic trust, their bargaining position would become weaker, making democratic transition much harder to achieve.

4. Increase Tensions between Civil Society and Opposition Parties
   If political parties are able to take advantage of media freedom to mobilize support, so, too, can social activists. This would reduce social activists' incentive to seek cooperation with, or organizational assistance from, political parties, especially when the media prove to be an effective mobilizing agent. To the extent that the separation between civil society and opposition parties is beneficial to the prodemocracy movement, this is not a problem. But in reality, this may not always be the case. The reason is that civil society groups differ from political parties with respect to both constituencies and objectives. While many civil society groups work on a narrow issue area, opposition parties seek to change the fundamental political order. For this reason, opposition parties are based on a broader coalition of support in society, whereas civil society organizations often draw support from a small group of concerned individuals. Such differences have two important implications.

   First, it would be relatively easier for civil society groups to extract concessions from the ruling elite, who may find the groups' demands less threatening to its vested interests. On the contrary, opposition parties who fight for a wholesale change of the political order may be unable to make any progress despite protracted negotiations with the regime. Second, the media may often find civil society organizations more newsworthy than political parties. This is not only because their causes are simpler and easier to understand (e.g., opposing the construction of a chemical plant versus designing a democratic electoral system)

but also because the actions of social activists are more colorful. Consequently, civil society groups may crowd out political parties in the media. If social activists manage to extract regime concessions from time to time, their success, together with the glory and media attention they constantly obtain, would embarrass political parties and entrench their ineffectual image. As the current study shows, many liberal social activists in Hong Kong consciously distance their movements from opposition parties for fear of "guilt by association"; the farther away from opposition parties they are, the more virtuous they appear. In this sense, their success brings little positive complementarity effect to the strengthening of opposition parties. Instead, it feeds on the opposition parties' failure. The simultaneous occurrence of a vibrant civil society and a depressed coalition of opposition parties in postcolonial Hong Kong is therefore no coincidence. Rather, the two events are causally linked.

This is not to say that civil society will always benefit from the media's mobilization power. The experience of liberal civil society groups in postcolonial Hong Kong suggests a possible, albeit subtle, side effect. Like political parties, if social activists can easily rally support through the media, they would have little incentive to invest in the organizational capacity of their groups. This will hinder the development of civil society organizations in the long run. Take the "Anti-High Speed Rail Movement" as an example. One of the activists, Bobo Yip, feels regretful that the movement failed to harvest a large number of followers because of its emphasis on "de-organization."[6]

In addition, without a solid organizational network, members' loyalty would be relatively weak. This makes the organizers of a movement reluctant to show solidarity with other civil society organizations, in order to avoid antagonizing some of their members. The result is compartmentalization of civil society, preventing social activists from forming a unifying alliance against the authoritarian regime. The "Anti-Patriotic Education Movement" is a case in point. One of the organizers in the "National Education Parents Concern Group" told me of recurrent internal disputes about whether and how they should voice out views on other thorny social issues, including political reforms.[7] But they have chosen to remain silent most of the time either because they lacked the time and manpower to investigate into the rising issues or because they failed to reach a consensus on how to respond. For example, on one occasion, the members ran into a debate on whether they should support the annual commemoration of the June 4 Incident. The group ended up deciding to steer clear of it, for fear of losing some members who are not sympathetic about the prodemocracy movement in the mainland.

This reaction of the "National Education Parents Concern Group" stands in stark contrast to that of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (PTU). As discussed in Chap. 4, the PTU is one of the largest and most organized liberal civil society groups in Hong Kong, with a membership of 80,000 strong.

[6]Personal interview with Bobo Yip on March 27, 2014 (Code: 30).

[7]Personal interview with a group member on May 16, 2014 (Code: 33).

> For many years, the PTU has been a staunch supporter of the prodemocracy movement in both Hong Kong and the mainland. Not only does it make statements to show its concern over various issues, it also helps disseminate information to its members to raise public awareness and provides logistic support to social activists on occasion. Apparently, the PTU cannot offer such practical support to other civil society groups without a strong organizational capacity.

As Beijing has agreed that the earliest time for Hong Kong to implement universal suffrage would be in the city's election for Chief Executive in 2017, Hong Kong's civil society is unlikely to remain quiescent until then. In fact, at the time of this writing, Hong Kong is mired in a serious governing crisis, which was instigated by an unprecedented social movement known as the *Occupy Central with Love and Peace*. The organizers of this movement had threatened to mobilize concerned citizens to occupy Hong Kong's central business district in case Beijing refuses to give Hong Kong people a genuine democratic election. The occupy movement came into being in the late September of 2014,[8] soon after Beijing announced a very conservative framework for the Chief Executive Election in 2017, stating that candidates are required to obtain the majority approval of a pro-Beijing nomination committee and that the number of candidates is limited to two or three. Under this framework, it is unlikely that the pan-democrats would have a chance to get the nomination.

Whether this conservative framework would become the reality is unclear. After all, the pan-democratic camp, given its critical minority position, still has the power to veto any political reform proposal. What is certain, though, is that if Hong Kong's civil liberties remain largely intact, the media will continue to play a crucial role in molding the city's prodemocracy movement in years to come. In particular, they will demonstrate great mobilization power to facilitate large-scale, spontaneous, albeit short-lived social movements. They will also empower Hong Kong's civil society by allowing concerned citizens to build horizontal linkages among themselves. Nevertheless, a successful democratic transition cannot depend on civil society alone, however strong it is. As the experience of postcolonial Hong Kong shows, the horizontal networks forged by liberal civil society groups are instrumental in triggering momentary public outcries but not very useful for resisting the inexorable rise of Beijing-sponsored parties that employ a grassroots strategy based on vertical networks of a patron-client relationship. The termites seem to have outflanked the elephants.

All this suggests the importance of political institutionalization. Diamond (1994, p. 15) has long argued that "the single most important and urgent factor in the consolidation of democracy is not civil society but political institutionalization." A stable and institutionalized organization allows opposition parties to form close

[8] At the time of this writing, the occupy movement has already lasted for more than forty days. Part of the downtown area, including Admiralty, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay, has been occupied.

and enduring ties with their supporters. Such supporters, who are recruited by party organization rather than because of ideological incentives, are essential to opposition parties in the struggle for democracy. Without them, opposition parties would need to draw political support predominantly from ideological voters. Consequently, they would not dare to make political compromises with the incumbent for fear of antagonizing their core followers (DeNardo 1985, pp. 84–86). However, if the opposition wants to persuade the ruling elite to relinquish power for good, it cannot avoid taking some expedient measures during the lengthy negotiation with the authoritarian regime.

The grassroots strategy of Beijing-sponsored parties offers different glimpses of the Chinese authoritarian state. Far too often the Beijing government is seen as ruthless and repressive. But as many scholars of authoritarian politics point out, few autocracies can survive on repression alone. In most cases, co-optation – or in the CCP's language, the "united front work" – plays a decidedly more important role in consolidating authoritarian rule. Postcolonial Hong Kong provides an interesting quasi-experimental setup to study the power and limitations of authoritarian co-optation. Because of Hong Kong's unique history and economic significance, Beijing has refrained from imposing heavy-handed political controls, for fear of jeopardizing the city's capitalist system. Co-optation became Beijing's major tool to establish its control over this former British colony. This tool, which manifests itself in the Beijing-sponsored parties' grassroots strategy, has turned out to be a great success, as evidenced by the ever-improving electoral performance of these parties at all levels of elections.

The electoral advances of Beijing-sponsored parties provide little sign of hope for the pan-democrats. If the former parties' grassroots encroachment continues unabated, pan-democratic parties may soon lose a critical minority in the LegCo, which implies that they will not be able to veto a conservative political reform bill that Beijing favors. From the perspective of prodemocracy voters, this may be a discouraging scenario. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the pan-democratic parties' failure to secure a critical minority in the legislature is also indicative of their declining popularity among voters. Should this really happen, the pan-democrats would not fare much better even if Beijing were willing to give Hong Kong full democracy.

While the electoral prospect of Beijing-sponsored parties may look rosy, there still exist several factors which may derail their success. First, internal strife among the pro-Beijing elite exists, albeit less visible. Thus far the success of Beijing-sponsored parties hinges upon their adherence to their grassroots co-optation strategy, which de-emphasizes ideology. However, their grassroots co-optation strategy is useful only because they have developed extensive patronage networks. Not all members of the pro-Beijing elite have access to such networks. If these members want to vie for political power, they are likely to adopt a different strategy in order to draw political support. In fact, Hong Kong has witnessed a rising tide of mass mobilization from the pro-Beijing camp since 2012. The organizers of these mobilization events are mostly new faces. Their strategies are also markedly different from those adopted by Beijing-sponsored parties. For instance, they are

prone to the use of loud and ideological tactics. Their controversial tactics may help them draw media attention as well as political support from radical pro-Beijing voters, but their presence may also cause a backlash against the pro-establishment camp as a whole in the coming elections – exactly the same problem that has plagued the pan-democrats. If the internal power competition among the pro-Beijing elite escalates, such ideological and media-driven political campaigns will multiply, which may eventually undermine the success of the Beijing-sponsored parties' low-key grassroots strategy.

Second, the fact that Hong Kong can still preserve much of its civil liberties is predicated on Beijing's self-restraint. But this self-restraint is not inevitable. In fact, since the inception of the *Occupy Central* movement, Hong Kong's civil liberties, media freedom in particular, have been under threat. For example, there were reported cases where Chinese state-owned banks stopped placing ads in newspapers that are considered neutral (BBC News 2014). Several outspoken journalists, radio hosts, and columnists were abruptly dismissed from their jobs. The Independent Commission Against Corruption raided the home of Jimmy Lai, the owner of the *Apple Daily*, over political donations. When the *Occupy Central* movement organized an unofficial referendum in June 2014, its online voting system endured a massive state-sponsored cyberattack. Although there have been no evidence to link these incidents to Chinese authorities, their occurrence within such a short period of time has already caused a chilling effect in Hong Kong. If Beijing loses its tolerance of Hong Kong's vocal civil society or if Beijing no longer considers the city as economically important as before, it may well take back the freedoms that Hong Kong people are currently enjoying and impose more heavy-handed controls over Hong Kong's society. The decline of civil liberties may result in a backlash against Beijing-sponsored parties in the voting booth. But of course, if Beijing decides to govern Hong Kong more forcefully, this would indicate a fundamental departure from its long-standing policy toward Hong Kong. In other words, co-optation will no longer be Beijing's only option and its dependence on Beijing-sponsored parties, its central co-optation machine, would therefore decrease. Under such circumstances, Beijing will likely overhaul the rules of electoral contestation.

Finally, the success of Beijing-sponsored parties hinges upon the enormous investment which they have injected into an elaborate local patron-client network. If their resources dry up, for whatever reasons, their seemingly invincible grassroots edifice may just well crumble.