

IPS Corporate Associates Lunch: The Impact of Occupy Central on Hong Kong

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(From left): Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office Director Fong Ngai and IPS Director Janadas Devan speaking to IPS Corporate Associates at a lunch event

The Occupy Central protest movement, which began in September 2014, saw tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents from all walks of life take to the streets. By November 2014 however, public opinion polls found that a majority of respondents did not support the protests, citing the inconvenience caused by the street protests to their daily lives.

Focusing on the impact of the protests on Hong Kong's economy and its ties with mainland China, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) invited Mr Fong Ngai, Director of the Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office in Singapore to a lunch session with IPS Corporate Associates (CA) on 19 January 2015. Mr Fong took questions from the 30 or so CA members as well as

IPS researchers who were present. The dialogue was moderated by IPS Director Janadas Devan.

Basic Law

Mr Fong began by explaining that Hong Kong's Basic Law mandates the ultimate aim of electing its chief executive by universal suffrage, upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee. In 2007, the National People's Congress of China Standing Committee decided that universal suffrage for selecting the chief executive may be implemented in 2017. Mr Fong pointed out that the crux of the issue dividing opinion in Hong Kong was the nomination method. The protesters were demanding civic nomination.

Aspirations of the Young

Mr Fong acknowledged that students who participated in the Occupy Central movement did so because they felt passionately about universal suffrage as well as several other social issues. This included their perception of the lack of social mobility and the unaffordability of housing.

An audience member asked Mr Fong what he thought the students wanted. She highlighted how she had heard of a key student protest leader applying for a job at the financial company, Bloomberg. This, she felt, was incongruent with the image many had of the students, with the assumption being that they would pursue careers directly related to the social issues they were passionate about. Mr Fong responded to this by pointing out the fact that some business leaders in Hong Kong today, when young, were student activists too.

Mr Fong said that Hong Kong's youth, while still understandably concerned about bread-and-butter issues, have broader concerns. Unlike those from the previous generations, they place importance on their voices being heard, desire conservation of the environment and historical buildings, and are seeking a better quality of life.

The key issue for the Hong Kong government, he said, was how to manage development with a better quality of life, and address the aspirations of the young. He referenced the 2015 policy address delivered by Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-Ying earlier that week. Among other things, Mr Leung said he would boost housing supply, economic development and competitiveness.

An audience member asked Mr Fong if he thought the students would be appeased if Hong Kong's housing and congestion issues were relieved. Mr Fong replied that that might not solve the problem fully because social goals, and not merely economic goals, increasingly resonate with the young today.

The Occupy Central protests had given rise to differences, even within families, said Mr Fong. While everyone in Hong Kong agreed with democracy and its related values, some people disagreed with protests as the means to such ends. This, he said, had led to the notable shift in public support for the Occupy Central movement. He added that the movement had polarised the general public and the Hong Kong Government needed to address this issue.

Mr Fong also pointed out that Occupy Central protesters had maintained a sense of civil responsibility despite participating in civil disobedience. He said the Occupy Central movement did not have a central commander, but the different groups of protesters took it upon themselves to set up trash disposal and recycling points, and study corners for students who had to sit for exams, for instance.

Relations with China

Mr Fong acknowledged that the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong did not sit well with the mainland Chinese government, but both Hong Kong and China were still committed to honouring the pledge of “one country, two systems”. He said there had been no severe economic fallout from the protest but acknowledged the concern for the political and social impact of the movement. What happens in Hong Kong does not merely affect Hong Kong’s population of 7 million, but is also a concern for mainland China’s 1.4 billion population, he noted.

The Hong Kong government, he said, is proactively fostering closer ties between young people from Hong Kong and mainland China. It is also seeking opportunities for Hong Kong students to travel out to the ASEAN region to be exposed to different political, socio-economic and business cultures, and to get a sense of the larger world beyond Hong Kong. Referring to the students as “Hong Kong’s future leaders”, Mr Fong said that there would be up to 250 of them taking up internships at some 70 different organisations and companies in ASEAN countries this summer.

Concluding the dialogue, Mr Fong acknowledged that there are people in Hong Kong who have negative perceptions of mainland China. Nonetheless, he was positive that the continual opening up of China and the exposure of Chinese citizens to different cultures would bring about change in the way they interact with the world. He ended the discussion on an optimistic note, expressing the opinion that mutual understanding and people-to-people relations between Hong Kong and mainland China would continue to improve.

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