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The Rise of “Localism” in Hong Kong

Malte Philipp Kaeding

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On 4 September 2016, Hong Kong’s voters went to the polls to elect the 70 members of its legislature, known as the Legislative Council or LegCo. The election results largely maintained the existing distribution of power between democratic and pro-Beijing (or pro-establishment) forces. But the vote also reflected the emergence of increasing divisions within each of these camps and especially the rise of localism, a new political tendency that seems poised to dramatically transform Hong Kong’s political landscape.

Since the transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China almost twenty years ago, on 1 July 1997, politics in Hong Kong has been shaped by the struggle over how to implement the “one country, two systems” formula. The Basic Law, the constitutional document of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, promised “a high degree of autonomy” for its citizens, including most importantly universal suffrage in choosing the city’s chief executive, who is currently selected by an electoral college dominated by supporters of Beijing. But despite several rounds of electoral reform since the handover, this promise remains far from being realized. Hopes that it would be achieved in time for the 2017 chief-executive election were dashed in August 2014, when Beijing put forward an institutional framework for reform that effectively ruled out genuine universal suffrage. According to this proposal, a special committee under Beijing’s control would nominate all chief-executive candidates, thereby ensuring that China could vet every name on the ballot.

In reaction, Hong Kong student organizations launched a boycott of academic classes and staged a strike outside government headquarters. When police attacked these students with tear gas, public outrage
sparked large-scale protests that merged with those of the civil-disobedience movement for universal suffrage known as Occupy Central with Love and Peace. These protests, led by student groups and Hong Kong’s younger generation, quickly evolved into the Umbrella Movement, a 79-day occupation of key sites in the city that began on 28 September 2014. The following year, in June 2015, China’s proposed electoral-reform framework—which required the approval of two-thirds of LegCo—was blocked by prodemocracy legislators.

Although the Umbrella Movement has since dissipated, it galvanized criticism of integration between the city and the mainland, building significant support among the younger generation for the idea of localism. At its heart, this broad term signifies a commitment to protecting the interests and identity of Hong Kong. Thus, localist demands center on defending such key elements of Hong Kong’s identity as its Cantonese language and its unique history and lifestyle. But they also go beyond cultural heritage to emphasize core civic values such as the rule of law and civil liberties, as well as Hong Kong’s economic and political interests. The scope of these demands has broadened as localism continues to evolve, most recently toward incorporating ideas of nation-building and self-determination.

What is already indisputable, however, is that these ideas have brought an explicit expression of local identity to Hong Kong’s legislative politics, and that Beijing sees them as a threat. Beijing’s heavy-handed intervention after the LegCo elections—disqualifying several localist lawmakers who refused to take the oath of office as written—is evidence of how much Beijing fears seeing the discourse on Hong Kong national- and self-determination become institutionalized. The decision significantly altered Beijing–Hong Kong relations by damaging the territory’s autonomy, and it has potential implications for Hong Kong’s ability to preserve its citizens’ fundamental rights and freedoms.

Historically, Hong Kong democracy advocates and lawmakers from established democratic parties, known collectively as pandemocrats, have viewed the democratization of Hong Kong as intrinsically linked to that of China. In keeping with this belief, the city’s civil society has held annual candlelight vigils on June 4 to honor the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and has lent continuing support to China’s prodemocracy movement. Two decades of pandemocrats’ failed efforts to achieve universal suffrage, however, have led nascent localist groups to start calling for a new strategy that focuses purely on Hong Kong’s own development. With this position, the localists are waging a two-front campaign, attacking not only the pro-establishment camp but also pandemocrats for their commitment to the idea that Hong Kong should remain part of China.

The September 2016 election was a milestone. It showed that localist discourse and the debate over relations with China had for the first time
displaced universal suffrage as dominant campaign issues. Turnout rose to record levels, reaching 58.3 percent for the 2016 LegCo races—the highest level in Hong Kong’s history and 5 percentage points above 2012’s turnout.1 With more than 2.2 million registered voters participating (of a total population of 7.2 million) and long lines outside a number of polling stations, the 2016 vote continued the trend of record-breaking turnout set by district-council elections the previous year. Fueling both campaigns was the enthusiasm of young people, sparked by the many new faces who have entered politics since the Umbrella Movement began.

The Changing Legislative Landscape

Hong Kong has an executive-led governing system that limits the power of its legislature, but LegCo still performs an important political function. Its role in monitoring the administration and providing a forum for policy debate is particularly critical. In recent decades, the legislature has significantly shaped Hong Kong’s democratic development, if only by passing or blocking government bills.

The distribution of power within LegCo determines its ability to play that role. Of the Council’s 70 seats, 35 are directly elected by universal suffrage in five geographical constituencies. Another 30 are elected by professional and special-interest groups known as functional constituencies. Most of these are dominated by business interests, and their votes are cast by leaders of organizations and corporations instead of rank-and-file citizens. Finally, 5 spots are known as “super seats” and are filled by universal suffrage from a territory-wide pool of candidates. (Only district councilors can run for super seats, though, which technically makes these seats a type of functional constituency.) Traditionally, pro-establishment parties and candidates have enjoyed an advantage in the functional constituencies, which has guaranteed them a structural majority in the LegCo. By contrast, pandemocrats have typically won seats only in those few functional constituencies where all members of a profession—for example, education or health services—have individual votes.

The September 2016 election was widely expected to benefit the pro-establishment camp. During the campaign, localist groups had declined to coordinate their efforts with pandemocratic parties, leading both to compete for and divide the nonestablishment vote. It was therefore anticipated that the pro-establishment camp would win a majority of the geographic constituency seats and gain a two-thirds majority in the LegCo overall. With majorities of both the functional and geographical constituencies, a group of legislators could amend LegCo’s rules of procedure—to curb the pandemocrats’ use of the filibuster, for instance. And with two-thirds of LegCo as a whole (or in other words, 47 seats), pro-Beijing forces could enact changes to Hong Kong’s political
Table—Hong Kong Legislative Council Election Results (2012 and 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro-establishment parties</th>
<th>LegCo Seat Count</th>
<th>Percent of Vote*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federation of Trade Unions</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal Party</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New People’s Party</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independents supported by the Beijing Liaison Office</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Other pro-establishment parties and independents</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>40</strong></td>
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<table>
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<th>Pandemocratic parties</th>
<th>LegCo Seat Count</th>
<th>Percent of Vote*</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Labour Party</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neo Democrats</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People Power / League of Social Democrats**</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>21</strong></td>
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<th>Localist parties</th>
<th>LegCo Seat Count</th>
<th>Percent of Vote*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALLinHK / Youngspiration</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civic Passion / Proletariat Political Institute / Hong Kong Resurgence Order</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demosistō</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy Groundwork</td>
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<td>Other localist parties</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-aligned parties</td>
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</table>

* Percentage figures only include geographic constituencies, while seat count figures include both functional and geographic constituencies.

** People Power and the League of Social Democrats ran competing campaigns in 2012.


structure—for example, by adopting Beijing’s proposed chief-executive election reform for 2017 or the harsh “antisubversion” national-security law that Beijing had sought in 2003, both of which the pandemocrats blocked.
Fears of a pro-establishment electoral victory were not borne out. Instead, the results gave a surprising overall gain to the pandemocratic and localist camps. Taken together, they won 19 of the 35 geographical constituencies, 3 of the 5 super seats, and an astonishing 7 seats in the functional constituencies. Their total win—29 seats—represented a net gain of 2 seats over 2012 (see Table). Crucially, they more than met the vital threshold of 24 seats—a third of LegCo—that they needed to retain their minority veto. Localist candidates supporting Hong Kong’s right to self-determination won 6 geographical-constituency seats, and candidates linked to the 2014 mass protests earned 2 seats in the functional constituencies. Among the pandemocrats, the Democratic Party—the mainstay of the liberal camp since 1994—reclaimed its traditional dominance by winning an additional seventh seat, despite years of declining vote shares. Meanwhile, the Civic Party retained its six seats and thus secured its position as the second-largest force among the pandemocrats.

The election marked a watershed in Hong Kong politics in three distinct ways. First, it highlighted the emerging ideological battles that are increasingly fragmenting the political field. Although the election has preserved the traditional 60 to 40 percent split in the popular vote between liberal and conservative forces, respectively, a wider array of winning parties and candidates now fall within the nonestablishment camp. Lawmakers who back the establishment are once again in the majority, with the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) remaining the largest single party in LegCo (with 12 seats) and the most popular party (with the largest single-party vote share—a sixth of the total). Overall, however, the victory of pro-Beijing forces was hugely facilitated by Hong Kong’s undemocratic electoral system, which awarded 22 of the 30 functional constituency seats to pro-establishment candidates while the nonestablishment forces won 21 of the 40 seats elected through universal suffrage.

There were also signs of deepening divisions within the conservative camp. The New People’s Party (NPP) picked up 3 seats and doubled its vote share largely at the expense of the business-friendly Liberal Party, which failed to score a single win among geographic constituencies. Both parties targeted middle-class, pro-establishment voters. The NPP is led by veteran lawmaker and former secretary for security, Regina Ip, who has expressed interest in running for chief executive in 2017. Ip’s visit the day after the election to the Beijing Liaison Office—the base of Chinese power and influence in Hong Kong—confirmed speculation that her party was supported by Beijing.

There were vote shifts and realignments in the nonestablishment camp as well. The election showed that the localists—as the new radicals and the political vanguard—could steal the limelight from the pandemocrats. Indeed, smaller groups across the pandemocratic spectrum
were hit hard, and several of their incumbents lost. The moderate Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood is no longer represented in LegCo, and the left-wing Labour Party has lost 3 of its 4 seats. Two radical democratic groups that were older than the Umbrella Movement, People Power and the League of Social Democrats, lost half their votes, and their electoral alliance managed to win only a pair of seats. One of these—earned by high-profile lawmaker and activist Leung Kwok-hung (nicknamed Long Hair)—was the last available seat in his constituency, and he won it by the narrow margin of slightly more than a -thousand votes.

Second, the election signaled that a new generation of activists had arrived in politics. Even as left-wing pandemocratic groups struggled, localists with roots in community activism surged ahead. In fact, two LegCo newcomers had previously launched their own grassroots organizations—Democracy Groundwork and the Land Justice League—that played prominent roles in the Umbrella Movement. The founder of the Land Justice League, Eddie Chu, had been a conservation and environmental activist for more than a decade, and his campaign exposed links among local landowners, organized crime, and political institutions in the New Territories. He won more votes than any other candidate in the geographical constituencies, suggesting that he and other new lawmakers might now professionalize their confrontational style by providing solid evidence of government mismanagement.

Much of this energy is owing to the youthful veterans of the Umbrella Movement. A telling example is Nathan Law, a former student leader of the Umbrella Movement protests who at age 23 became the youngest legislator in Hong Kong’s history. Law is the former secretary-general of the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), and he cofounded Demosistō, a center-left party, with other student activists in early 2016. (Another cofounder was Joshua Wong, who has been the public face of Hong Kong social movements since his high-school days. He was still only 19 years old in September 2016, too young to run for office.) In his campaign, Law promised to serve only two terms—there is currently no term limit—stressing the need for fresh faces in LegCo.

Demosistō and several other newly established parties now champion distinctly localist agendas. Another example is Youngspiration, which won a pair of LegCo seats in September 2016, including one for its founder Sixtus Leung (nicknamed Baggio). Youngspiration had been formed the year before, in order to field candidates for the 2015 district-council elections—Hong Kong’s version of local-government races—and its original emphasis was on district and community work, a conventional theme in such local contests. But Youngspiration also stood out from the field; it offered a clear concept of Hong Kong identity and, unusually, made direct references to the protests in its campaign. A year later, its rhetorical emphasis shifted from the Umbrella Movement to
localism, but it openly advocated Hong Kong’s national self-determination while pursuing a bottom-up strategy. Both Youngspiration lawmakers immediately brought their radical stance into the legislature. During the oath-taking ceremony, they changed key words and mispronounced “People’s Republic of China” in a way that was deemed vulgar and derisive toward China. This made them prime targets of pro-Beijing groups and the administration of Chief Executive C.Y. Leung, and raised doubts about whether they would be able to take their seats. In early December, the administration sought the legal ejection from LegCo of four additional members on grounds that they had failed to take the oath of office validly.3 The four comprised veteran lawmaker Long Hair plus three newly elected localists, one of whom was Nathan Law.

Youngspiration ran its LegCo campaign through an alliance, known as ALLinHK, that included five other post–Umbrella Movement organizations. Hong Kong Indigenous (HKI), a more radical localist group that was not part of ALLinHK, has embraced a confrontational protest style. It criticizes both traditional social movements for their inability to bring real change to Hong Kong and LegCo as an institution dominated by establishment-friendly parties. Although it fields candidates for LegCo, HKI refuses to become a conventional political party. It seeks to use the Council as a platform for promoting localist ideology, and has vowed to use any resources gained through politics to fight for Hong Kong’s independence. The government barred HKI’s leader, Edward Leung, from running for a LegCo seat, but Leung threw his support behind Baggio and remained prominent on the campaign trail. The two of them were supported by an efficient team of young volunteers.

The success of these and other actors associated with the 2014 protests signaled the institutionalization of civic activism in the post–Umbrella Movement era. Here is the third takeaway from the LegCo election. September 2016 sealed the Umbrella Movement’s legacy of a politicized younger generation. Yet neither the movement itself nor its core demand for universal suffrage was a central campaign issue. Rather, these themes have been eclipsed by the new emphasis on such localist themes as identity and self-determination. This shift has allowed former Umbrella Movement activists to reach a much broader audience. One veteran legislator, Leung Yiu-chung, who campaigned across Hong Kong for a super seat (which he won), even said that his prominence in the movement cost him votes.4
Yet not everything went smoothly for the localists, who suffered two surprise defeats. Gary Fan, a pandemocrat who called himself a moderate localist, and veteran lawmaker Raymond Wong—in the greatest upset of the election—both narrowly lost their seats. Wong’s loss by a mere 424 votes was all the more unexpected considering his leading role in the localist movement and his electoral alliance with two localist organizations.\textsuperscript{5} As one of the government’s most prolific critics, Wong had often filibustered, and had been one of those bringing a new and more confrontational style to the legislature. It remains to be seen how Wong’s absence will change LegCo’s culture.

Localism: Origins and Evolution

That localist groups and candidates managed to set the agenda in September 2016 is all the more impressive given how young their movement is. The suggestion that Hong Kong had distinct economic and social interests—much less a distinct identity—from China’s only entered the broad public conversation with the emergence of the Hong Kong heritage movement in 2005. Around that time, civic activists took up the cause of protecting local-heritage sites from redevelopment, trying and failing to save the historic Star Ferry Pier from demolition, for instance. In 2008, a group of self-avowed moderate localists organized online to research and discuss Hong Kong–China relations.\textsuperscript{6} Their findings inspired the complaint that members of Hong Kong’s political establishment, including pandemocratic lawmakers, had been promoting policies that favored China’s interests over Hong Kong’s.

Chief Executive C.Y. Leung’s confrontational style and poor governance record have frustrated large segments of society and fueled this complaint’s rapidly growing popularity. His administration—which will end at the close of June 2017 as Leung has chosen not to run again—is widely seen as having enabled Beijing’s hard-line approach to the “one country, two systems” framework, with the “one country” side of the formula increasingly emphasized. Beijing has aimed above all to control Hong Kong’s political development with an eye to avoiding unrest while ensuring economic stability. Beijing’s means to this end have been dominance over political and media institutions; integration of the Hong Kong and Chinese economies; and control over ideas, as typified by the use of “patriotic education” to mold Hong Kong’s national consciousness.

Localists across the political spectrum agree that these policies threaten the interests and culture of Hong Kong, and that the government does not represent the interests of its people as it strives to please Beijing. They disagree, however, about how to respond and what it will mean for the city’s future. Left-wing localists tend to see domestic politics and Hong Kong–China relations through the lens of capitalist exploita-
tion, and consequently call for transforming the socioeconomic system. Moderates favor working within the system to achieve reform, hoping ultimately to turn the Basic Law’s guarantee of a higher level of autono-
my for Hong Kong into a reality. Since 2011, more radical and populist strands of localism have also emerged. Chinese tourists and traders have fed these feelings by, for instance, flooding into northern Hong Kong to buy vast quantities of baby formula. The vogue among Chinese mothers-to-be for moving to Hong Kong to give birth, moreover, has seemed to be yet another way in which Chinese interests override those of Hong Kong.

Much of modern localist ideology draws from the work of ethnographer Chin Wan, especially his 2011 volume *Hong Kong as a City-State*. The book imagined a Hong Kong that was all but completely autonomous with regard to China. It stirred localists by coherently explaining how the territory’s identity differed from that of the mainland. Building on these ideas, legislators such as Raymond Wong and groups such as Civic Passion began to confront the cultural and economic “mainlandization” of Hong Kong, denying that its values and norms were convergent with China’s. The vision of Hong Kong as an independent nation next received widespread attention in early 2014 in the magazine *Undergrad*, which is published by the student union of Hong Kong University. The students went on to republish the articles in an edited volume on the eve of the Umbrella Movement protests.

The Umbrella Movement marked a turning point for localism by demon-
strating that even three months of widespread demonstrations could not secure universal suffrage. Given this reality, localists began to argue that the only way forward was to build a Hong Kong nation with some form of self-determination or outright independence from China. During the run-up to the LegCo election, this idea gained traction. In February 2016, HKI was involved in an outbreak of civil unrest that became Hong Kong’s biggest riot since the 1960s. Shortly afterward, HKI leader Edward Leung competed in a LegCo by-election, finishing third among seven candidates with 15 percent of the vote. His respectable showing signaled that a sizeable part of the populace accepted localist ideas. A month later, former student-union leader Andy Chan Ho-tin founded the Hong Kong National Party (HKNP), which openly proclaimed an independent Hong Kong Republic as its goal. Both Hong Kong and Chinese authorities were swift with their condemnations, and the HKNP was denied registration.7

The government’s opposition to localism hardened. On 14 July 2016,
the Electoral Affairs Commission ruled that all LegCo candidates would have to sign a form acknowledging Hong Kong as an inalienable part of China, per the Basic Law. This requirement was seen as singling out localist contenders. After all, candidates were already required by LegCo ordinance to uphold the Basic Law. Moreover, the measure gave authorities the power to monitor and potentially disqualify candidates—even nominees—for advocating independence. In all, six localist candidates were barred from running even though most of them, including Edward Leung, signed the form. And although he was the only of the six barred candidates who had a real chance of being elected, outrage over the government’s action sparked Hong Kong’s first ever overt rally for independence, organized by the HKNP. According to the high-end estimate, a crowd of ten-thousand people, most of them young, gathered in Tamar Park to hear the banned candidates speak. (As for Leung, disqualification did not stop him from campaigning on behalf of Youngspiration’s Baggio, who promised to promote Leung’s ideas if elected.)

These developments sparked a realignment of policy priorities within both the Hong Kong government and the Beijing Liaison Office. If once authorities had reacted to unrest by seeking to avoid excessive confrontation, lately the official stance has hardened. Particularly since the Umbrella Movement, C.Y. Leung’s personnel appointments have reflected his desire for total institutional control and absolute loyalty. (A stark example is the way that he has used his power to name members of university councils.) And because C.Y. Leung, unlike his predecessors, lacks strong backing from business and traditional leftist pro-Beijing groups, he has had to rely heavily on the Beijing Liaison Office for support. As a result, that organ’s influence on Hong Kong’s domestic politics has grown, and its approach has become more explicitly interventionist.

The Legislative Council is a key stage on which these trends have played out. The Liaison Office had long been suspected of providing logistical support to established conservative groups, such as the DAB, that are known for friendliness to Beijing. But starting in 2008, and particularly during the September 2016 election, the Liaison Office has supplemented this strategy by grooming nominally independent LegCo candidates, generally with a professional middle-class background, and giving their campaigns significant support.8

This tactic has helped the Liaison Office to create its own de facto LegCo power base, which now includes three formally independent legislators, all of them newcomers to the Council. The victory of one, district councilor Junius Ho, hinted at the close ties between the Liaison Office and Chief Executive C.Y. Leung. Ho, former president of the Law Society, had made his name by vocally criticizing Occupy Central protests and defeating a veteran pandemocrat in the 2015 district-council elections. He then rose quickly to a local administrative position that gave him an executive role at the Heung Yee Kuk, a powerful pro-
establishment advisory body in the New Territories. Three months after that, he won his LegCo seat and began calling for pro-Beijing changes to the Kuk.9 Ho’s opponent in the LegCo race, Ken Chow, claimed that individuals with mainland links had first offered him money to withdraw, and then, when he refused, had threatened him and his family until he dropped out.10

Ironically, these interventionist tactics are actually fragmenting the pro-establishment camp. The Liaison office’s strategic maneuvering has forced it to work with various competing interests and to reshuffle old alliances. A lot of its resources in the 2016 campaign were allocated to newer political parties, especially the NPP (whose novice legislator Eu-nice Yung has been alleged to have close family links to Beijing).11 Old allies in the same constituencies, such as the Federation of Trade Unions (FTU), were ignored. Moreover, the NPP’s willingness to embrace Liaison Office support is a departure from its customary appeal to conservative middle-class voters, and might cost the party in the long run.

A Growing Political Force

Despite government resistance, localism is here to stay as a force shaping Hong Kong’s political development and animating its youth. That localist candidates won nearly a fifth (19 percent) of the 2016 popular vote confirms that localist ideas now belong to the political mainstream. Indeed, established parties from across the political spectrum now feel compelled to respond to the localist agenda. Two traditional pandemocratic groups, the Civic Party and the Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood, amended their manifestos to include localist references and even calls for self-determination. Many of the successful young district councilors and LegCo candidates from the Civic Party and even the Democratic Party (which has long promoted the idea of a democratic China) either identify as localists or sympathize with them.

Localism has even spread to the pro-establishment camp. Financial Secretary John Tsang, considered an aspirant to the post of chief executive, recently called localism a constructive force that could improve the territory and cultivate a sense of pride.12 During the 2016 LegCo campaign, the pro-Beijing Federation of Trade Unions called on voters to “stand up for Hong Kong values,” and even a DAB candidate campaigned on the slogan “Yes to localism, no to splittism!”

Popular understandings of localism continue to vary greatly, however. It would be misleading to assume that everyone using this term looks critically on Hong Kong–Beijing relations or favors separatism. Nevertheless, the newly mainstream focus on Hong Kong’s interests above other considerations has reshaped the political landscape. The old rift between pro-establishment forces and pandemocrats can no longer
explain Hong Kong’s politics. The split between those who support and those who oppose the establishment now looms larger.

Recent opinion polls confirm a strengthening of Hong Kong identity. In a June 2016 survey conducted by the Public Opinion Programme at the University of Hong Kong, 42 percent of respondents identified themselves as Hong Kongers only, with no reference to China. Among those between 18 and 29, over 60 percent did so. And although these ideas do not automatically translate into a demand for independence, many, especially among the young, see at least a strong correlation. (Even in local secondary schools, dedicated study groups and organizations with names such as “Studentlocalism” have begun springing up to promote Hong Kong’s independence.) Remarkably, independence—an option rarely thought of even two years ago—drew support from 17 percent of respondents in a survey that the Chinese University of Hong Kong published in July 2016. Another 23 percent expressed ambivalence, which means that a full 40 percent of Hong Kongers would not rule out the idea of independence outright. As a point of comparison, it took the Scottish National Party, one of Europe’s most successful nationalist movements, decades of campaigning to reach similar levels of support for regional autonomy.

How Will the Localists Perform in Office?

Localism’s fate rests largely with the newly elected localists and their ability to perform in office. Will they favor a confrontational approach within LegCo? Whether and how the pandemocrats, the establishment camp, and the Hong Kong government engages them will go a long way toward answering that question. It will take veteran politicians with deep institutional knowledge of and experience with cross-party dialogue to engage the localists. Yet some key figures who could have played this role (including former LegCo president Jasper Tsang and Democratic Party chairwoman Emily Lau) retired in 2016.

One promising figure in this regard is the pandemocrat Alvin Yeung, who at age 35 is the rising star of the Civic Party. He has had some success uniting mainstream liberals and building bridges linking non-establishment forces. Yeung entered LegCo only in February 2016, via a by-election, but his cordial relations with localist Edward Leung during that campaign were seen as an omen of possible future cooperation between the two camps. Further evidence for this view comes from Yeung’s successful campaign strategy in September, which saw him unite all prodemocratic candidates in his constituency.

On the localist side, a lawmaker to watch is the 33-year-old leader of Civic Passion, Cheng Chung-tai. He brings to the chamber both deep academic expertise and firsthand experience with mainland China’s political reality (he earned a doctorate at Beijing University). This, in ad-
dition to his already distinctive position in the nonestablishment camp, could help Cheng become a key person—especially if he can transform Civic Passion into a full-fledged political party.

An unprecedented level of polarization, however, is already visible in new LegCo, and new tensions are no doubt in store. An indication of what might lie ahead is an inquiry into the citizenship of the new LegCo president, initiated by the novice legislator and former journalist Eddie Chu of the Land Justice League. His investigative approach to politics is likely to put new pressure on pro-establishment elites. Also of note, the popularity of youth-led Demosistō among middle-class voters could fuel a resurgence of moderate left-wing politics along with localism. The success of the new wave of localism and the discourse on Hong Kong independence depends on the ability of these novice politicians to unify their supporters and move the debate forward.

Meanwhile, the C.Y. Leung administration, in alliance with pro-establishment forces, seems determined to curb localism and contain the spread of pro-independence ideas at all costs. Its heavy-handed approach is degrading key features of Hong Kong’s political system—including the separation of powers and the independence of the legislature and the judiciary.15

Indeed, in a highly controversial move, the Standing Committee of China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) issued a unilateral Basic Law interpretation on the issue of the Youngspiration lawmakers’ oath-taking, prior to a Hong Kong court decision on the matter.16 The pro-Beijing media’s identification of various types of oath violations—all targeting localist lawmakers as distinguished from the several pandemocrats who also protested during the ceremony—suggests that Beijing seeks to strip localism of any institutional representation whatsoever.

The beginning of LegCo’s current term (set to run until 2020) has thus seen a dramatic escalation of confrontation. The NPC’s Basic Law interpretation suggests that Beijing can potentially redefine all the guarantees given in the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. The implications for Hong Kong’s political development are significant. Radical localist groups are likely to be limited in their ability to use the institutional route for promoting their ideas, but they could use a forthcoming by-election (to replace the two disqualified candidates) as a plebiscite on Hong Kong self-determination.

Most importantly, the radical localists have succeeded in forcing the central government in Beijing to lay bare its contempt for Hong Kong’s autonomy. In 2014, Beijing made it clear that Hong Kong’s chief executive cannot be freely elected; now it has shown starkly that the city’s already weak lawmakering body can be overridden and that Beijing’s interpretations of the Basic Law can be used to render local courts helpless.

This development is all the more worrisome given that new controversies are now likely to erupt with greater frequency. Moreover, the un-
precedent levels of enthusiasm for candidates such as Edward Leung and groups such as HKI also signal that many people are willing to support a politics of confrontation.

Hong Kong’s next political milestone will be the election of the chief executive on 26 March 2017. C.Y. Leung will be leaving. A leader less divisive than he has been could sap some of localism’s momentum, though Beijing’s recent actions against localist lawmakers are likely to enrage young Hong Kongers. Furthermore, the overall constraints on Hong Kong’s dysfunctional political system will remain in place, as will Beijing’s hard-line strategy toward the territory. And the longer Hong Kong’s identity is seen as threatened, the more emotional resonance the idea of self-determination will gain. Already it has added a new layer of complexity to what it means to be a Hong Konger, transforming national identity and giving young people in particular a different perspective on the future. The changes ushered in by the 2016 LegCo election—a new alliance between Beijing and pro-establishment parties, a repositioning of pandemocratic forces, and an elevation of localist politics—all point to growing uncertainty in the years ahead. The short-term prospects, at least, appear grim, given the power and the intransigence of Beijing.

NOTES


2. One is Shiu Ka-chun, a core Occupy Central member and a self-proclaimed localist, who was elected by the social-welfare functional constituency. The other is the architecture sector’s new lawmaker, Edward Yiu Chung-yim, whose views hew closely to those of left-wing localists, and whose election marked the only victory over an incumbent among all the functional constituencies in 2016.

3. They lost their seats after using their LegCo oath-taking ceremony as a protest platform during the October swearing-in ceremony. The practice has been common among pandemocrats since 2004, but this time pro-Beijing groups argued that the duo had offended the Chinese people by using terms derogatory to China and holding a banner that read “Hong Kong is not China.” The Hong Kong government launched an unprecedented legal challenge to bar the two from LegCo. The High Court ruled that their conduct during the ceremony amounted to a refusal to take the oath. Both lawmakers vowed to appeal, and their seats remain vacant pending a final judgment. If the decision is upheld, there will be by-elections for these seats in 2017, after the voting for chief executive is held.

4. In an interview with the author, Leung Yiu-chung stated on 2 September 2016 that some of his traditional supporters had told him that they would not vote for him, as they were unhappy with his role in the Umbrella Movement.

5. These organizations were Civic Passion (whose candidate was the only one in the alliance who won a seat) and Hong Kong Resurgence Order, led by the father of Hong Kong localism, ethnographer Chin Wan.

6. These activists were among the first to use the localist label. They have said that their word choice was inspired by the Taiwanese localist movement of decades earlier.
7. Hong Kong has no parties law, so political groups are forced to register as companies.


11. It is said that her father was the CEO of several state-owned enterprises.


13. In this poll, 38 percent of respondents chose a mixed Hong Kong–Chinese identity and only 17.8 percent a purely Chinese identity. Even among respondents aged 30 or above, 37.8 percent identified as Hong Kong residents only. See “People’s Ethnic Identity,” Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong, 21 June 2016, www.hkupop.hku.hk/english/popexpress/ethnic.


15. LegCo’s independence suffered a blow with the continuing controversy over the disqualification of two Youngspiration legislators (see endnote 3). On October 25, LegCo president Andrew Leung decided to delay the repeat oath-taking procedure after Chief Executive C.Y. Leung warned that the affair could harm Hong Kong–China relations.

16. The phrasing of the interpretation effectively bars the Youngspiration duo from retaking their oaths, and gives the official administering the oath significant power to determine how “sincere” it was. On the December charges, see Ellie Ng, “Hong Kong Government Lodges Legal Challenges to Eject Four More Pro-Democracy Lawmakers from Legislature,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 2 December 2016, www.hongkongfp.com/2016/12/02/breaking-hong-kong-govt-lodges-legal-challenges-four-pro-democracy-lawmakers.