

# The Hong Kong Protests Are About More Than an Extradition Law

Huge crowds took to the streets to resist moves by Beijing to curtail human rights.

## By The Editorial Board

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If we are to believe Carrie Lam, the chief executive of the Hong Kong government, the hundreds of thousands of people who marched through the city's sweltering streets on Sunday just didn't get it. They may have thought they were protesting a proposal to allow extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China, but, in Ms. Lam's view, they failed to understand that the measure would ensure that the city did not become a haven for fugitives and that existing legal protections and human rights would remain in force.

And if we are to believe the press in mainland China, that vast throng was really "some Hong Kong residents" who had been "hoodwinked by the opposition camp and their foreign allies" into opposing the legislation, to cite the version in China Daily, an organ of the Chinese Communist Party.

No, Ms. Lam and editors of China Daily, the people of Hong Kong were not "hoodwinked," nor did they misunderstand this legislation.

They understand very clearly that the measure making its way through the local legislature, where pro-Beijing deputies hold sway, has nothing to do with bringing murderers to justice, and everything to do with breaking down the

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firewall between Hong Kong's rule of law and mainland China's thoroughly politicized judicial system. They understand that the legislation represents a further encroachment by Beijing into the "high degree of autonomy" Hong Kong was promised when Britain returned the territory to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

Ms. Lam, at least, did not publicly question the motives of the protesters, who came out in the biggest numbers since at least the 1997 handover. "I believe most of the protesters yesterday loved Hong Kong and came out for the sake of the next generation," she said. In pledging to protect human rights, she at least acknowledged the core concern of the residents of every age and calling who so jam-packed the downtown streets that other people couldn't get out of subway stations.

Beijing, by contrast, showed its true colors by playing down the protests and spreading the shopworn canard that they were the work of "foreign forces."

"We firmly oppose any outside interference in the legislative affairs" of the region, intoned the Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, perhaps oblivious to the irony that the only interference was by his government.

Ms. Lam has not backed down on the extradition bill, and neither she nor the city legislature is likely to buck Beijing. Under Hong Kong's limited democracy, the chief executive is approved by Beijing and only half the seats in the legislature are filled by popular vote, though Ms. Lam insisted on Monday that the extradition bill was not imported from the mainland.

The residents of Hong Kong demonstrated once again that they will not easily surrender the civil liberties they learned to regard as their self-evident due under British rule. Five years ago, protesters of the Umbrella Movement occupied central city streets for 79 days to demand more transparent

elections. And in 2003, an effort to enact a package of laws prohibiting sedition, subversion and treason against the Chinese government was shelved after half a million residents poured into the streets in protest.

Hong Kong's freedoms are a standing irritant to the Communist authorities in Beijing, who have not ceased chipping away at them. One example is a draft law to criminalize disrespect for the Chinese national anthem; another is the disappearance of people from Hong Kong into mainland custody.

The extradition measure was initially presented as needed to send a Hong Kong man to Taiwan, where he allegedly killed his girlfriend. But to the democracy-minded people of Hong Kong, this was only cover for a portion of the bill that would also allow extradition to mainland China, which would enable Chinese authorities to pry political foes from Hong Kong by leveling false accusations and demanding their extradition. That, in effect, would extend China's reach into Hong Kong and strip its residents of the protection of the law.

Sunday's protesters vowed to be back in the streets when the bill next comes before the legislature. If Ms. Lam really believes they are acting out of concern for "the next generation," she would do well to heed them and shelve this cynical assault on Hong Kong's rule of law.

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