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# The organisation and future of Hong Kong's 'open source' anti-extradition law movement | Hong Kong Free Press HKFP

7-9 minutes

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**By Oiwan Lam**

In the wake of the 2019 anti-extradition protests that swept Hong Kong, local cafe Brew Note hosted a public salon to discuss the new generation of protesters on the island. The guest speaker was [Professor](#) Francis Li, director of the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who shared insights into how protesters were able to organize on such a large scale and discussed the future of the movement.

The [series](#) of protests began in March 2019 in response to the Hong Kong government's attempt to amend the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation. If it had passed, the proposed bill would have empowered the Chief Executive and the local courts to handle case-by-case extradition requests from territories with no prior agreements, including Taiwan and China.





Photo: Todd R. Darling/HKFP.

Massive mobilisations on June 9 and 16 were successful in suspending the bill from being discussed by the Legislative Council. However, protesters were outraged by the police crackdown of the June 12 protests and demanded that the government investigate police misconduct and that Chief Executive Carrie Lam resign.

The anti-extradition campaign, which saw more than 2 million people take to the streets on June 16 alone, has shocked everyone in Hong Kong. The scale of the response has led many to ask how the protests were organized and how they were able to mobilize the largest protests in Hong Kong's history. Professor Francis Li's observations shed some light on these questions. Below is a summary of Li's presentation:

### **Open source organisation of the protests**

While many people thought that the anti-extradition protest was a leaderless campaign, Li clarifies that a central organising body was initially involved to help coordinate them.

The anti-extradition campaign was kickstarted with a rally on April 28 hosted by the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), a local NGO coalition. The massive rallies on June 9 and June 16 were also hosted by CHRF as the law requires that all demonstrations have a

police permit. Moreover, the coalition has strong connections with the pan-democratic sector and Li adds that a majority of its supporters are political liberals and moderates.

In addition to a central organising platform, Li highlights the many other periphery protests and actions mobilized online through the [LIHKG forum](#) and Telegram mobile message channels. He was also quick to note that these spontaneous networks were not associated with the CHRF and the members of these platforms were not following instructions from the CHRF or any other pan-democrat lawmakers.

During the campaign, the public figures acted like facilitators by providing assistance to the already protesting crowds. Li states that if a public figure attempted to make a speech or give instructions in any way during the protests, the crowds would boo at them. They didn't want to be led.

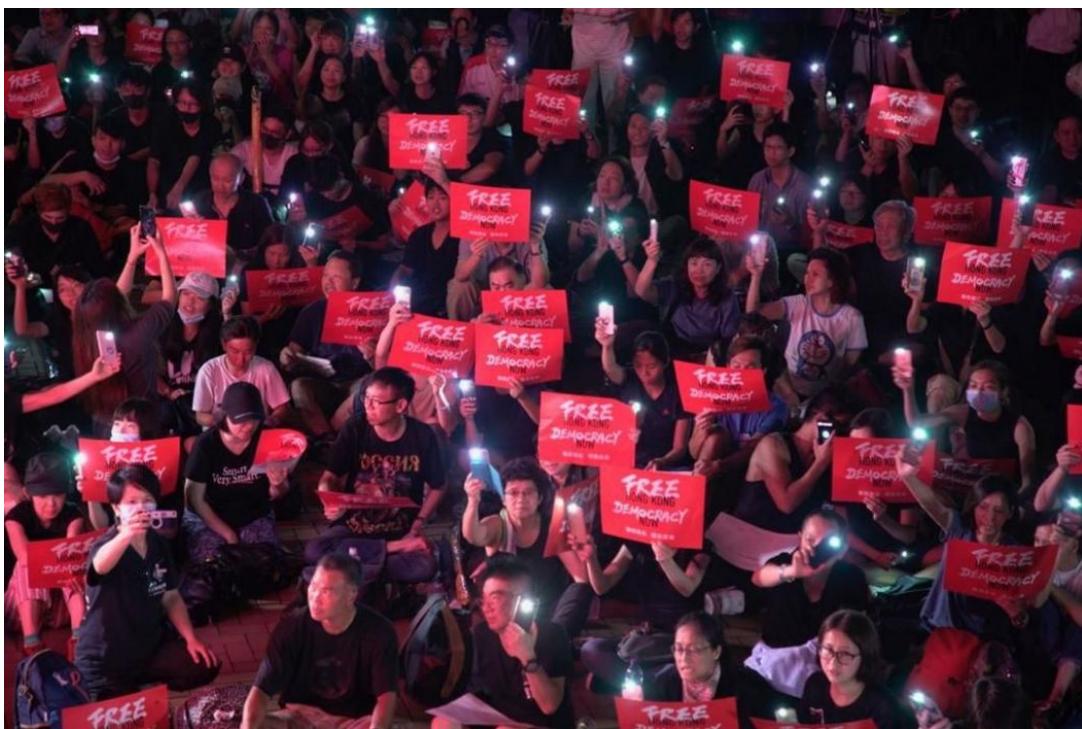


Photo: Darius Chan Ho Shun/CHRF.

On the LIHKG forum and Telegram open groups, popular comments, and suggestions were pushed to the top. The protesters

would use the platform for brainstorming protest ideas, and someone would pick up the most popular ones and form a team to follow up and draw a plan.

Li compared this method to a kind of open source technology organisation where someone proposes a central code and another person easily picks it up afterwards to develop their own products. A decentralised organisation model like this is considered more creative and effective. It encourages participation and the cost of failure is minimised as many teams are in operation and one or two failures would not affect the whole production line.

For Li, new communication platforms such as LIHKG and Telegram facilitate this type of decentralised organisation. Telegram allows for public channels with tens of thousands of subscribers while LIHKG's Reddit-like crowd ranking function allows people to know opinions are the most popular.



Photo: May James.

### Young people came out en masse

Below is an initial survey on the demographics of the anti-extradition protesters conducted by a multi-university research team that Li belongs to:

- On [June 6](#), 26.3 per cent of the protesters were 22 years old or younger and 44.5 per cent were 30 years old or younger. The result was similar to the July 1 rally in 2003;
- On [June 16](#), 30.8 per cent of the protesters were 22 or younger and 57.1 per cent were 30 or younger;
- On June 17, 49.1 per cent were 22 years old or younger; and 81.4 per cent were 30 years old or younger;
- On [June 21](#), outside the police headquarters, 63.9 per cent were 22 years old or younger and 91.7 per cent were 30 or younger;
- At the [June 29](#) assembly at Central district, 38 per cent were 22 years old or younger and 75.8 per cent were 30 years old or younger.

A majority of the young people who participated in the protests only started paying attention to the anti-extradition issue around the end of May after students and alumni from hundreds of secondary schools signed a joint campaign.

According to the survey done on June 21, among the young protesters, 86-89 per cent found telegram to be an important communication channel for organising.





Photo: Isaac Yee.

As for the role of the CHRF, 81 per cent of the young respondents who were 20 years old or younger found the platform important, 74.6 per cent of the respondents between the ages 21 to 25 found it important, and 65.5 per cent of the respondents between the ages 26 to 30 found it important. In short, Li notes, the younger the protesters, the more they recognised the important role of CHRF.

On the question of whether or not they agreed with the view that radical protests would cause a negative social reaction, the research team found that 62.2 per cent aged 20 or younger agreed, 54.8 per cent between the ages 21 to 25 agreed, and 53.3 per cent between 26 to 30 agreed.

### The future of the anti-extradition protests

According to Li, the decentralised organisational model works well for single-issue defensive campaigns but it might not necessarily be the best long-term approach. After the government redraws the bill and the campaign puts forward a list of new demands, without a centralized organizing body, it would be difficult to negotiate with the government as no one can represent the campaign.



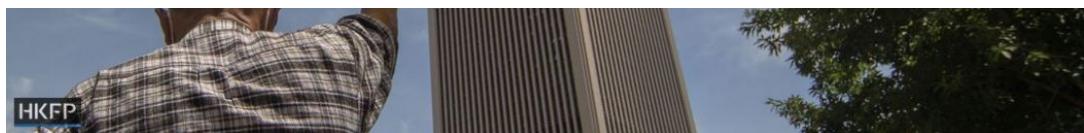


Photo: Isaac Yee.

There are different types of social movements, one is an issue-based campaign, like the 2014 Umbrella protests and the anti-extradition protests. These can lead to long-term movements like those seen after the July 2003 rally, when a large number of online independent media outlets emerged. Similar developments were observed after the 2014 massive democracy protests when some protesters formed activist groups advocating for “localism” and some started community-building work on a grassroots level.

According to Li, how the anti-extradition protesters find their own position in the movement is still an open question.

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*This [article](#) originally appeared on Global Voices, where [more stories](#) on Hong Kong’s anti-extradition protests can be found.*