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# Hong Kong Takes Cautious Steps Towards Full Democracy

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2012 Hong Kong will select a new chief executive and legislature in elections that will be more broad-based than in previous years. Attributed to modest reform measures approved by lawmakers in Beijing and Hong Kong, the two sets of elections will see small but important changes in the political development of the Special Administrative Region. However, it remains to be seen whether they will help move the territory towards the goal of full universal suffrage, which has been ruled out in the short term by Beijing but continues to be the focus of an ongoing debate about political reforms in the city.

Although the central Chinese government has sovereignty over Hong Kong, the city was promised a high degree of autonomy under a 'one country, two systems' rule agreed with the British prior to the handover in 1997. As a result, the city, formally a 'Special Administrative Region', has its own laws and police force. Its chief executive oversees the day-to-day running of the territory but defers to Beijing on topics such as political reform, defence and foreign affairs. Until now, the chief executive has been picked by a specially selected 800-member electoral committee composed of many businessmen and professional representatives, themselves drawn from designated sectors. In the 60-seat Legislative Council, half the members are directly elected through geographical constituencies, while the other half are picked by so-called 'functional constituencies', which represent elite business and professional groups. Pro-democracy critics in Hong Kong have long criticized the functional constituencies system, arguing that it is not representative of the population and that those elected are mostly pro-government.

Over the years, Hong Kong's pro-democracy lawmakers and activists have pushed for hastening the pace of political reform, but with little success. Part of the problem is that many in the territory, such as those in the finance sector, oppose rapid political reform because they fear it will threaten the stability they enjoy and bring turmoil to the financial market. A larger part of the frustration results from the fact that although Hong Kong's *de facto* constitution, the Basic Law, states that universal suffrage is the eventual goal, the document does not spell out a road map for when or how this may come about. Uncertainty over whether Hong Kong is, or ever will be, ready for full democracy continues to be a key sticking point between those who favour a cautious approach and those who are keen to introduce more drastic changes.

## 2012 AND BEYOND

The current chief executive, Donald Tsang, sought to push through proposed electoral reforms in 2005, but that effort was voted down by pro-democracy lawmakers who thought the package was too timid. A crucial decision was made two years later, when China's National People's Congress Standing Committee gave the green light for the possibility of direct elections for the chief executive position in 2017 and of full direct election of all members of the Legislative Council thereafter (the next election being in 2020). Furthermore, although Beijing ruled out universal suffrage in the 2012 elections, it did indicate that it would allow some changes to the electoral rules. For some, the December 2007 decision was disappointing because it pushed back full democracy for at least another decade, pending further rounds of constitutional reform; others welcomed it as the first clear timetable for democratic reform the city has seen since the handover.

Tsang then proposed modest changes for 2012, which were initially shot down by Hong Kong's pro-democracy lawmakers but were eventually approved last summer after a last-minute compromise was reached. The changes affirm that the next chief executive will be picked by an expanded 1,200-strong election committee. They also state that 10 new seats will be added to the 60-member legislature – five to be directly elected from geographical constituencies and five to represent district councils, which are community-based bodies.

The approved changes may not appear to be huge milestones, but they are significant because Chinese officials had previously opposed upsetting the equal divide of Legislative Council seats between the popularly elected geographical constituencies and the functional constituencies. The changes mean that, from next year, 40 of the 70 members will be elected more or less directly by Hong Kong voters. But the pro-democracy camp has been left divided, with some members bitterly criticizing others for signing off on reforms that do not go far enough.

## CHALLENGES AHEAD

Even with the expanded 1,200-member Electoral College and Legislative Council, it is difficult to see next year's elections as conventionally democratic, and the way ahead is far from clear. Two main questions still stand in the way of fulfilling the pro-democrats' aspirations for a fully representative government. Will Beijing continue to have behind-the-scenes influence on the next leader and his administration? And what changes need to follow the incremental modifications next year to achieve full democracy?

So far, the two leading contenders in next year's leadership race are both known as pro-Beijing politicians, and neither has expressed a strong vision for universal suffrage. Henry Tang, who resigned in September 2011 as the city's No. 2 official to consider running, has strong ties with the business and finance sectors. If he runs, he will face competition from Leung Chun-ying, an influential member of the cabinet advising the current chief executive and a long-time member of China's political advisory body. In the run-up to the leadership race, both have focused on social, not political, issues such as housing. Whoever runs will be nominated and chosen by an Electoral College that is expected to continue to toe Beijing's line; and regardless of the size of the college, good relations with top Chinese officials, or 'having Beijing's blessing', as many call it, will continue to be a deciding factor in who wins. Even when universal suffrage comes into being, Beijing will very likely continue to exert a strong influence over who can be nominated as candidates, and must approve the public's decision. It is not at all clear what, if anything, can be done to change this arrangement.

A more practical and urgent problem is whether lawmakers from both sides – not to mention the mainland Chinese authorities – can agree on how the new electoral system will work and how to manage the transition from the 2012 procedure to a full public plebiscite. Critics have blasted the 2012 electoral reforms for doing little to define the roadmap towards a direct public vote in the next six years. Indeed, there is as yet little indication of who and how many people will nominate chief executive candidates for a public vote in 2017 or beyond. As for the direct election of the entire Legislative Council, the mostly conservative functional constituencies will either have to be scrapped or fundamentally changed – and the 2012 reforms did not address either option. In any case, no political changes can become law until they get approval from the National People's Congress.

Finally, the fact that Beijing will also see important leadership changes in 2012 raises some questions. It is as yet difficult to assess what kind of position and

strategies Vice President Xi Jinping, who is expected to replace President Hu Jintao next year, has in mind for dealing with Hong Kong's political transition in the next five years. Changes in the leadership of the Communist Party of China in 2012 will most likely introduce more caution and uncertainty than most pro-democracy activists had hoped, and it will not be easy for Hong Kong's next leader, the city's lawmakers and Beijing's new leadership to work together towards a solution that pleases all.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Sylvia Hui is a journalist from Hong Kong, where she reported on business and political news in the city and the south China region for four years before moving to London. She has published in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *Asia Sentinel*, *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, among others. She holds a MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and a BA in English from Oxford University.