

## **Hong Kong mob protesters rule the streets**

By Hedley Thomas, The Australian, 19 November 2019

Masked protesters armed with powerful bows clash with police at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on Monday. Picture: AP

The strategy has been working.

A Hong Kong-based lawyer friend and long-time contact yelled at me on Monday while echoing the sentiments of many here, furious at what they see as “appalling bias” in reporting which has glossed over the violence and vandalism of the protesters.

“You’re a journalist and you guys are responsible for a lot of this now. Every camera is pointed in one direction to paint this false narrative of the police as brutal bastards and the protesters as heroic democrats with a noble cause,” he said. “The coverage emboldens them and now they think they can get away with anything.”

My friend is a fearless defence lawyer but he won’t go on the record. “There’s mob rule and people who speak out against it risk getting their heads kicked in.”

Many here are now cowed into silence. A prominent Australian Hong Kong businesswoman told me: “No one is prepared to speak on the record because media is fuelling this as a spectator sport — it’s not. These are our friends, our family, our staff. This is not some opportunity for political grandstanding or inflaming the situation. We’re heartbroken at what has happened and how the Hong Kong government has failed to take any accountability.”

Teenagers are running away from home to join the protests. Schools are closed and children as young as 10 are joining front lines.

These streets which are now the scenes of fierce battles are fondly familiar to me from six years living and reporting in Hong Kong before and after the 1997 handover of the British colony to China, and multiple visits over the past 20 years. But the chaos, fear and loathing on the streets now is intimidating and there’s no end in sight.

A police personnel vehicle is on fire as protesters throw fire bombs on a bridge at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University on the weekend. Picture: Getty Images

There’s a multitude of catalysts for the mayhem — anger over the number of mainland Chinese coming in and burdening the health system and lengthening the public housing queues; anger among the young that they’re not as prosperous as their parents; anger at the ineptitude and arrogance of the Hong Kong government, a bureaucratic, overly privileged and pale shadow of its former self; and anger that this city is and always was part of China and will one day be completely enveloped with the likely loss of fundamental freedoms.

But the anger has become uncontrolled and dangerous to such an extreme that it threatens to do worse long-term damage.

A mainland Chinese man who had already been beaten up by protesters was splashed with lighter fluid and ignited last week, resulting in horrific burns, for daring to demand the mob put down their weapons and make peace.

The iPhone video of this callous, permanently disfiguring attack has been widely shared, but the attacker remains free and the protesters have suffered little damage to their brand.

An elderly man was killed last week by a brick thrown by one of the protesters. But any recriminations over this unlawful killing are drowned out by the protesters' claims of police brutality.

“A university is supposed to be a breeding ground for young talents but it has unfortunately become a battlefield for criminal and rioters,” Chief Superintendent of Police, public relations branch, Mr Kwok Ka-chuen, said at a press conference on Monday.

Some Chinese students from the mainland who speak a distinctive dialect and not the Cantonese of Hong Kong are afraid to talk in public, fearful it will lead to a public beating or a brick in the back of the head. The hapless police are in a no-win situation. Molotov cocktails, bricks prised from the pavement, iron bars — anything with the potential to cause injury or death to police — are hurled at police who surround the protesters. But unlike in the past when this level of civil disobedience would not have been tolerated, police are hamstrung by the weak leadership of government. So they stand back, taking too long to move in, clear the radicals and restore order.

A protester runs from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University yesterday. Picture: Getty Images

The masked protesters give placid interviews to international and local journalists and speak of their determination to achieve democracy in Hong Kong. Yet despite their violence and escalating aggression, they're invariably depicted as brave freedom fighters standing up for democracy.

At any other time in Hong Kong, or in any other place, these people would be condemned as brutal thugs, guilty of at least some of the excesses of the Chinese Communist Party that the protesters rail against.

Yonden Lhatoo, the South China Morning Post's chief news editor and a former colleague, wrote bravely: “You can literally count on your fingers the number of people with the courage to say anything aloud nowadays against the destruction of our city. The reality is there are thousands of youngsters on the streets who have tasted blood and become intoxicated by the success of mob rule. They are supported by a massive demographic that includes lawyers, teachers, doctors and other professionals who constantly gloss over and find excuses for all the outrageous excesses on the front lines of the anti-government movement.” He fears for the police “because you can already see discipline among frontline officers unravelling as they reach the end of their tether”.

Protesters form a human chain to pass items to the frontline during clashes with police yesterday at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Picture: AFP

Businesswoman Annie Wu Suk-ching, heiress to one of Hong Kong's largest restaurant groups, saw her eateries trashed and boycotted after she spoke out against the protests. Ms Wu gave media interviews and spoke at the United Nations Human Rights Council in September, criticising a small group of protesters for "systematic and calculated violent acts".

Several of her outlets, such as Maxim's and Arome bakeries, Genki Sushi and local Starbucks franchises, were smashed and vandalised. Conversely, her views won praise on the mainland, including in the China Daily.

Chinese and expatriate friends and contacts are bracing for worse to come. Their businesses, homes and livelihoods are under serious threat as a clueless bureaucratic cadre in the Hong Kong government shows how a lack of political savvy and practical experience can make a terrible crisis worse.

One of the world's miracle economies and financial centres is reeling. Its well-resourced and highly disciplined police force has been cast by the protesters and influential sections of the local and international media as a public enemy. The protesters are Hong Kong's enemy right now, but few dare say it.

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## 328 COMMENTS

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Peter

48 SECONDS AGO

An excellent commentary by Hedley - as usual. But one critical factor is missing: describing the clear covert and overt provocation from Western governments with the very deliberate aim of exacerbating the situation in order to provoke the Chinese government into retaliating.