Social Movement, Civil Society and Democratic Development in Hong Kong

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This paper discusses the evolution of social movements and civil society in Hong Kong, and its relationship with the democratic development of Hong Kong. It will first review the conceptual relationship between civil society and democratization, with special reference to the Hong Kong context. It will then discuss the historical evolution of social movement in Hong Kong since the 1970s. By analyzing the pattern of organization of civil society organizations (CSOs), and the relationship between civil society and political society, this paper addresses the relationship between social movement, civil society and democratic development in Hong Kong.

This paper shows that although Hong Kong has a vibrant civil society, and with social protests a very common phenomenon especially after 1997, it has been less than able to push more progressive democratic or social reforms. With weak horizontal links between CSOs, and weak linkage between the civil society and the political society, the CSOs opt for more *ad hoc* organizational forms after 1997 which are not conducive of accumulation of movement resources and experience. By an analysis of the experience of Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), during the struggle against Article 23 and its subsequent role in the democracy movement, it shows the strength and limitations of this new *ad hoc* organizational form. In general, the civil society in Hong Kong after 1997 has been better able to defend itself against encroachment from the state, but less able to accumulate enough political prowess to force the government to adopt social and political reforms.

**Some Thoughts on Civil Society and Democratization in Hong Kong**

Civil society is one of the most popular concepts in contemporary social science. Historically the struggle for civil society in Europe went hand in hand with the struggle for a market economy, both in medieval times and in recent struggles in Eastern Europe. Both civil society and market economy were seen as vital public
spheres that can be created autonomous from the state, thus constraining state power in the process (see Arato, 1981; Keane, 1988). In this light, civil society is a sociological counterpart of the market in the economic sphere, and to democracy in the political sphere (White, 2004, p.6). Scholars on democratization emphasized the role of the civil society in democratization. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986)’s classic study on democratic transition saw “resurrection of civil society”, which led to a mobilization from below, as a crucial factor in forcing authoritative openings in many third wave cases. A growing and strong civil society alters the balance of power between state and society, disciplines and monitors the state, redefines the rules of the political game along democratic lines, and acts as an intermediary between state and society (White, 2004, pp.13-15; Diamond, 1999, p.239). It can also supplement the role of political parties in stimulating political participation, increasing political efficacy and promoting democratic citizenship (Diamond, 1999, p.242). It helps to inculcate tolerance, willingness to compromise, and respect for opposition viewpoints, all deemed vital attitudes and values to a functioning democracy.

An autonomous and vibrant civil society, however, does not necessarily bring about a democratic political regime. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) were the first ones to tell that without divisions within the incumbent elites, it was impossible for the civil society, no matter how strong it was, to force open an authoritarian regime. Kamrava and O’Mora (1998) claimed that for civil society to play an important role in democratization, the civil society organizations (CSOs) must be operated democratically, must complement their issue-related demands with demands for political democracy, and need to gain sufficient power by horizontal linkages between CSOs. They also have to have a certain level of organizational institutionalization, since associational life according to shared rules is the crux of civil society (Kamrava and O’Mora, 1998; Diamond, 1999).
While Hong Kong has been regarded as one of the freest market economies of the world, with civil liberties (after 1970s) rivaling those in western countries, and having one of the freest media in the region, the civil society in Hong Kong has not been able to bring about full democracy. The cultural theorists, most notably Lau Siu-kai, tended to explain this by political culture and the weak organizational capacity of the civil society. Lau (1984) argued that the political culture of the Hong Kong Chinese was marked by “utilitarian familism”, as the Hong Kong Chinese put family values over societal values, and relied on kinship networks (and not political participation) to solve their livelihood problems (Lau, 1984). They also had insufficient understanding or a “partial vision” of the concept of democracy, focusing on instrumental values of democratic reform rather than seeing democratic participation as a right (Kuan and Lau, 1995). Surveys in the 1980s and early 1990s showed that while the Hong Kong Chinese had a satisfactory level of political knowledge, they usually had low political efficacy and thus seldom participated in political affairs (Lau and Kuan, 1995). The Hong Kong society also showed very weak horizontal linkages between civil society organizations (CSOs) to put demands on the government (Lau, 1984).

This dominant paradigm of Hong Kong studies saw the colonial state as largely autonomous from societal influence, with the civil society too weak to enforce changes in government policies. The influential works of Lau (1984) and King (1975) largely took political stability and the absence of social challenges to colonial rule as their starting point. As Chiu and Hung (1999) pointed out, these early sociologists had a “high threshold of instability”; any collective action that fell short of fundamentally challenging colonial rule would be seen as insignificant. By focusing mostly on social and political stability, they naturally overlooked the diverse forms of grassroot protests and resistance movements in Hong Kong (Lui and Chiu,
2000, pp.5-6). More detailed studies of postwar Hong Kong revealed that there were significant social and political movements from society (Lam, 2004, pp.53-64). These movements varied in terms of scale, publicity, and intensity. They included movements seeking change in government policies (e.g., campaign against rent control, campaign to change marriage laws), industrial action (e.g., tram workers’ strike), outbursts of violence with political and nationalist underpinnings (e.g., the 1956 and 1967 riots), and campaigns against private corporations (e.g., against rise of telephone tariffs). Lam (2004, p.59) counted 212 and 137 events of political participation in the decades 1949-59 and 1960-69 respectively, a not insignificant figure even if compared with the 1970s and beyond. Industrial conflicts were far from absent, although trade union movement had only a marginal influence at the workplace, industry and society levels (Lui and Chiu, 2000, p.6; England and Rear, 1975; Turner et al. 1980). These studies all pointed to significant political participation from civil society even during the early postwar years.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that there was relatively little conventional political participation by the masses and CSOs before the 1970s. Lam pointed out that the participation before the 1970s was mostly discursive in terms of strategies, actions and channels of influence (Lam, 2004, p.221). The actions ranged from public violence (the 1956 and 1967 riots), conventional labor union action (the beginning of the 1952 Tramway workers’ dispute), public petition (the campaign to change marriage law), and lobbying of legislators and government officials (the campaign to change marriage law). There were no designated institutions of participation, as the formal channels were mostly used for co-optation of elites, not for voluntary participation from the civil society. More political participation from the masses came only after the 1970s.
The Coming of the Social Movement Industry

The rise of social movements in the 1970s in Hong Kong was the result of a number of factors. Politically, the emphasis on “consultative democracy” by the colonial government led to better tolerance of social protests and petitions, creating a “political opportunity structure” that encouraged political participation (Lui and Chiu, 2000, p.7). Economically, the economic take-off and colonial social reforms in the 1970s meant that the fruits of economic development were finally trickled down to the lower class, which encouraged more demands for social improvement. Socially, there was a distinct gap between the quality of services provided by the government and the needs for social development and desires of the local residents, creating extra demands for reform (Lui and Kung, 1985, p.72). Demographically, while before the 1970s Hong Kong was largely regarded as a refugee society, the 1970s saw the rise of a new class of educated youth, who was born or brought up in Hong Kong and showed better sense of belonging to Hong Kong, and were more eager to correct the ills of the colonial regime. University student movements in the early 1970s set the pace for future social movements. Culturally a Hong Kong identity was beginning to ferment. The disturbances of the 1960s led to a resuscitation of the young generation on the future and the identity of Hong Kong (Lui, 1997). The enhanced international recognition to PRC, including the normalization of PRC-US relationship and the entry of the PRC to the United Nations, stirred nationalist sentiments in the territory. The movements in the early 1970s thus had a distinct nationalist and anti-colonial flavor.¹

The 1970s’ movements were a confluence of various sentiments and concerns, fermented within the local civil society. It kind of started from movements with

¹ For example, the major social protests in the early 1970s included the Protection of Diaoyu Islands movement, the movement to make Chinese the official language, and the anti-corruption movement.
nationalist flavors such as the Protection of Diaoyu Islands Movement and the movement to make Chinese the official language in the early 1970s. These nationalistic movements more or less had anti-colonial implications, and so were the social movements directed against colonial injustices, the most representative being the anti-corruption/anti-Godber movement in 1973-4. Entering the 1970s, residents’ movements at neighborhood level took center stage. As housing has been a key issue of concern in the densely-populated Hong Kong, the residents’ movements played a prominent role in the urban social movements in 1970s to 1980s (Lui and Kung, 1985, p.5). Adopting social movement theories of Alinsky, the residents’ movement of this stage used professional community organizers to train and organize residents’ leaders, and mobilized residents by community issues and used social protest actions to force government into negotiations (Fung, 1990). The movements ranged from demanding improvement of facilities in public housing and squatter areas, to resettlement, and to more progressive demands to housing policy. A study of social conflicts in 1975-86 showed that housing issues was the second most common areas of conflict, only after labor conflicts (Cheung and Louie, 2000, p.70). The study also showed that workers, unionists, residents and community activists were frequently involved in the social conflicts of this period (Cheung and Louie, 2000, p.89).

Over the years, the residents’ movements allowed the movement groups to accumulate experience and resources and stimulated the awareness of residents. It also left a major legacy on the subsequent social and political movements in Hong Kong. The advantage of the Alinsky model was that it did not require a lot of resources, and did not require a change of the power configuration of the political system. It stressed empowerment of the masses by stimulating awareness and participation, and did not need the intermediation of other political actors. There
was a major limitation, however. With the undemocratic nature of the colonial regime, the residents’ movements at this stage had little actual political prowess to change government policy. This had two effects on the direction of the movement. Firstly, with little institutional leverage, the activists had to rely on mobilizing public opinion support to put pressure on the government. Collective action and street-level protests were major means to attract media coverage to earn public sympathy and embarrass the government. This in the end posed constraints to the form and actions adopted by the movements: as earning public sympathy was key to success, activists were usually loath to take radical or confrontational actions (Luk, 1994, p.41).

Secondly, because of the lack of institutional channels to effect policy changes in the early stage, when democratization started in the mid-1980s the activists saw that as a good window of opportunity to increase their political leverage and to further the movement. Many social activists, including professional social workers, ran in the District Board and Urban/Regional Council elections in the 1980s and participated actively in the democracy movement in the 1980s. To them, the democracy movement, by demanding the opening of the political regime and the sharing of political power, was a natural sequel of the broader social movement. The 1980s thus saw social and political movements on various fronts. At the neighborhood level, residents’ movements formed the crux of grassroots movements. Social activists began to share some institutional power through being elected into District Boards and the Urban/Regional Council. At the community level, livelihood concern groups (民生關注組) were formed as grassroots movement groups at the wider district level. At the societal level, the reform forces invariably joined hands on territory-wide movements in the form of ad hoc coalitions.
As Lui and Chiu (2000) pointed out, the pressure groups at this stage had little difficulty in joining together to form ad hoc organizations for a common cause. Despite their ideological differences and different concern areas, they were all reformist in nature, and saw various social movements as parts of a larger movement of decolonization and reforming the regime. The limited political opportunities and the common experience of fighting against a bureaucratic, closed, colonial administrative state drove them together (Lui and Chiu, 2000, p.9). For example, the movement to shelve the Daya Bay Nuclear Plant in 1986 brought 117 groups from various sectors together, although it was originally an environmental issue (see Ma, 1999; Scott, 1989, pp.309-316). There was also better integration and coordination between community groups from different districts, and between CSOs and the emerging political society. For example, the People’s Council on Public Housing Policy (PCPHP) was a pressure group that organized neighborhood associations in different districts in the 1970s and 1980s. It also actively fielded candidates in the district-level elections in the 1980s.

The New Social Movements

The 1990s saw a gradual detachment of the political society from the civil society in Hong Kong. This trend of detachment had to do with new trends of development within the social movement industry, with a gradual widening ideological gap between the political parties and the CSOs, and with the CSOs’ disappointment with both the performance and political effectiveness of the elected legislators in the 1990s. These several factors, however, were mutually-reinforcing, leading to new forms of social movement in the 1990s and beyond.

When the District Boards (DBs) were first set up in the 1980s, many social activists saw participation in the DB elections as “wars of position” (Public Policy
research center, 1985) that were vital to the future development of democracy and social movement in Hong Kong. To these activists, the DB seats represented institutional resources and influences that had never been opened for competition before, which could be used to further social and political reforms. They generally believed that with elected legislators or DB members, social mobilization could bring greater pressure on the government and better effect changes with their allies in the establishment.

After 1991, the CSOs quickly discovered the myth of this limited representative democracy. Limited to a minority in most of the elected councils, the pro-democracy councilors could not bring as much policy changes as they wished. Electoral politicians also had a different set of preferences or incentives after they became elected legislators. They became more constrained by the mainstream public opinion, and were more bent on compromise with both the establishment and other groups. As popularly-elected legislators they were also loath to support the more radical or confrontational actions of some grassroot CSOs. This, coupled with the trend of “new social movement” in the social movement industry in the early 1990s, sped up the detachment of CSOs with political parties.

The early 1990s saw the rise of “new social movements” among CSOs. The new social movement stressed more thorough discussions among the participating masses about the goals and courses of action and collective decisions among the participants, with the professional organizers taking a less dominant role. It valued equality between the organizers and the masses, with a view that the masses, and not the professional activists, were the true subjects of movements. It stressed direct dialogue between the masses and those in power, often with the help of more confrontational actions, in the process of which doing away with the mediation of politicians or mass media. To these activists, the direct confrontation and dialogue
would lead to a fundamental resuscitation of the power relationship within the society among the participants (Luk, 1994; Mok and Yu, 1996).

The coming of this trend was due to several developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the subsequent debate on the future political formula had turned the attention of most Hong Kong people, and in particular the mass media, towards constitutional and not livelihood issues. Average social movements found it more and more difficult to attract public and media attention and to arouse public sympathy. Secondly, the development of elected councils since the 1980s absorbed a lot of political participation, which drove the masses to become more “reliant” on “professional” politicians to channel their interests, which had a negative impact on political participation. However, social activists quickly found out that the elected politicians were not that effective in influencing government policy after all, and may not accurately reflect the interests of the grassroots citizens. They also found that the media had their own biases and agendas, which could not be relied upon to articulate the interests of the grassroots (Luk, 1994). For these reasons, the new social movement activists stressed the initiatives and participation of the masses to empower them, and believed that direct action confronting the authorities could transcend the limitations of the media and elected politicians.

Ideologically, some activists of the new generation have also become more anti-establishment and particularistic in orientation. Student movements in Hong Kong after the 1989 Beijing democracy movement bore a new generation of activists who were more anti-establishment, were inclined to less formal and more spontaneous mode of action, and preferred to distance themselves from electoral politicians (Choy et al., 1998). In short, they were more likely to buy into “new social movements” ideas. Affected by civil society theories of action which had been in vogue since the
late 1980s, they were more inclined to disengage themselves from the formal political institutions. With many of these student activists serving in the CSOs in the 1990s and beyond, the CSOs became more single-issue-oriented, had a tendency to shy away from mainstream politics, and had a lower propensity to form territory-wide coalitions on issues of broader concern, if compared to their predecessors. They also had more of a “not-in-my-backyard” mentality, seeing specific policy issues as concerns of individual communities and not broader problems of societal development and reform (Lui and Chiu, 2000, p.13; Lai, 2000). Ideologically they preferred to have a more pluralistic movement, confronting the establishment on various fronts based on equal participation. They more or less refused to accept leadership of the older generation of mainstream democrats, and preferred a more diversified movement form.²

The years 1991-95 saw a few incidents where social protesters took confrontational actions that embarrassed senior government officials.³ For the mainstream democrats who were appealing to the broader electorate, the actions had become too radical for them and were generally reluctant to stand behind these movements. This in turn was seen by the grassroots activists as betrayal and a desertion of the pro-grassroots position by the party politicians. Movements such as rehousing of the rooftop structures in Tsuen Wan and Mongkok in 1994-95, which the mainstream pro-democracy parties failed to support, were watershed events after which the grassroot activists increasingly deserted the pro-democracy parties out of disappointment. The Democratic Party also grew increasingly middle-class-oriented

² Author’ interview with Rose Wu, Chief Executive of Hong Kong Christian Institute, veteran social activist, on August 11, 2003.
³ Examples of these incidents included: (1) In October 1994, residents of rooftop structures in Tsuen Wan blocked the entrance of the Building Department in Central; (2) In October 1994, Secretary for Health and Welfare Alice Fok was besieged by protesting elderly people demanding improvement in public assistance; (3) In September 1995, residents of temporary housing threw rats onto the car of Governor Chris Patten, leading to skirmishes between police and residents. See Mok and Yu (1996, pp.83-4).
after 1997,\textsuperscript{4} which partly contributed to its detachment from the pro-democracy unions and other grassroot groups. After 1997, the links between CSOs and the political society were severed, with little mutual trust between them. The two became more and more “specialized”: the political parties focusing on the parliamentary and electoral arena and had weakened linkage with grassroot CSOs, while the CSOs did not believe that the partly-elected councils were important battlefields. They preferred to focus on their sporadic, issue-oriented actions in their own issue areas. It was also relatively difficult for the CSOs and political groups to form territory-wide coalitions or movements after 1997, as they often did in the late 1980s.

**The Counter United Fronts**

The detachment of civil society from the political society does not mean that the social movements in Hong Kong died down after 1997; they just took on new forms. Table 1 shows that after 1997, there were more than 2,000 public meetings and processions every year, an average of 6.4 per day, most of them protests against government policies or at least expression of policy demands. At one point, public protests were so frequent that the international media nicknamed Hong Kong “the city of protests” (\textit{Washington Post}, June 28, 2000, p.A21).

Post-1997 events showed that the CSOs had been effective in using social protests to resist perceived infringement by the state on civil society. Human rights activists and pro-democracy politicians were quick to voice their opposition whenever they perceived that the autonomy of civil society was going to be curtailed. Professional bodies such as the Hong Kong Journalist Association and Hong Kong Bar Association played an important role in defending press freedom and rule of law.

\textsuperscript{4} For the program shift of DP, see Ma (2001, 2002b & c).
Events that allegedly infringed on press freedom or rule of law would immediately receive condemnation from these professional bodies. The religious sector was also adamant in defending religious freedom and the freedom of speech. For example, in 2000 the Vatican canonized 120 foreign missionaries and Chinese Catholics martyred in China, a move not welcomed by the PRC government. A CGLO official asked the Hong Kong Catholic Church to adopt a low-key approach, which was promptly retorted by the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, accusing the Chinese government of infringing religious freedom and went ahead with the celebration. In the case of Falun Gong, which brought accusations from both the pro-Beijing circles and the SAR government as an “evil cult” in 2000-01, the Christian churches stood firm in defending Falun Gong although they were not directly related.

The vibrant civil society and vocal CSOs of Hong Kong was a key factor in defending autonomy and liberty of Hong Kong after 1997 (Holliday, Ma and Yep, 2002). The watchful eye of the foreign governments and international media certainly played a part, as both the SAR government and the Central Government did not want to tarnish Hong Kong’s international reputation as a free city, and the image of “One country, two systems” and “high autonomy” in that regard. The CSOs, however, were less successful in forcing the government to change its policies. With very limited resources, weak horizontal linkage between CSOs, little collaboration with the political parties or elected legislators, and only a partly-elected legislature in an executive-dominant system, it was difficult for the CSOs to effect changes in government policies.

The post-1997 movement industry saw the rise of ad hoc united fronts formed by different CSOs in various areas. Most social activists interviewed by the author said

that this organizational form began to become popular in the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{7} CSOs with similar concerns would join together for a series of actions, usually over a certain policy issue, cause or incident. There was usually no formal organization and little organizational resources (e.g., usually they do not even have paid staff for the coalition), and the coalitions usually did not even register as a formal organization or registered society. The *ad hoc* united fronts usually last only months, and will be inactive after the passing of the issue or the series of actions.

A quantitative survey on the social movement after 1997 showed that this kind of *ad hoc* united fronts were very common. Based on newspaper reports from January 1998 to December 2004,\textsuperscript{8} I counted the frequency of social actions (including street-level protests, signature campaigns, press conferences, public declarations of positions, petitions to the government or the Legco, legal actions, etc.) involving CSOs in the name of “coalitions”, “joint conference”, “united fronts”, etc. The results showed that a total of 190 such coalitions or united fronts existed and acted during this period. Altogether they had 700 counts of social actions, on average 100 social actions every year.\textsuperscript{9} (See Table 2)

Table 2 about here

There were several interesting observations from this survey of these united front actions. Firstly, a large number of them had very limited counts of social actions in a

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\textsuperscript{7} Author’s interview with Chong Yiu-kwong, January 13, 2005; with Richard Tsoi Yiu-cheong, January 14, 2005; with Rose Wu, August 11, 2003.

\textsuperscript{8} The database of press reports was based on the Wisenews database in the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, which collect the news stories of all major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong.

\textsuperscript{9} A social action that lasted for more than one day will only be counted as one social action. For example, a sit-in protest or a signature campaign may last for more than one day or maybe even weeks, but it will only be counted as one social action. A social action may receive multiple reports from different newspapers, but it will treated as one social action nonetheless. This may be different from the method of counting of public meetings and processions made by the government as listed in Table 7.5.
span of seven years. A total of 72 fronts (or 36.2% of total) only had one action count in 1998-2004. Another 92 (46.2% of total) had no more than five actions, which means 82.4% of these fronts had no more than five actions in a span of seven years. It was not difficult to explain the pattern: many of these fronts were *ad hoc* alliances formed for targeted actions against a specific event or government policy proposal. After the proposal was dropped or adopted these coalitions would invariably ceased to operate. Secondly, these united fronts covered a wide range of issues, including education, social welfare, unemployment/poverty, human rights, democratic development, to medical issues, with these policy areas occupying roughly the same proportions. Practitioners of the same trade or industry in defense of their sectoral or occupational interests made up 50 or about 25% of the fronts or 18% of the action counts. Thirdly, street-level protests including demonstrations, rallies or petitions remained the most popular form of social action. Out of the 703 counts of social actions, 353 or about 50% belonged to this category. It should be noted that direct contact with legislators or officials made up only 53 or 7.5% of the total action counts.

On the face of it, this mushrooming of counter united fronts, covering such a wide range of issues, was a demonstration of societal pluralism. However, it was not difficult to conceive that these *ad hoc* united fronts usually could not accumulate enough resources for sustained movements to effect government policy changes. They were mostly formed to express opinions or objections over specific issues. Many of these group participants were very conscious of their own group identity and were not willing to subordinate itself or devote much resources to a commanding formal organization. These united fronts would raise objections to a specific proposal, maybe forcing the government to reconsider the issue if they succeeded in arousing enough public attention, but they usually could not sustain their participation and
organization after the initial flurry was over.

Among the 203 counter united fronts, only 15 had ten counts or more social actions within seven years. Six of them belonged to coalitions of pro-grassroots CSOs, which joined hands to demand better social welfare (or against cutting of welfare) and better protection to the lower class. Two of them were coalitions of small political groups that demanded the resignation of CE Tung Chee-hwa. Two of them campaigned on causes of anti-discrimination, and the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) (see below) was a large umbrella organization of many different groups (see below). These more active coalitions had something in common: they usually had a core of more established CSOs, CSOs that had a longer history or more resources, which allowed them to sustain the movement for a longer period of time. For the other fronts, they were usually not resilient enough to press the government into changing their policies.

The Struggle Against Article 23: CHRF as a United Front

The political movement against Article 23 legislation was the best case to analyze the effectiveness and limitations of the counter united fronts as a movement organizational form. The political struggle was a case of civil society in self-defense against perceived encroachment by the state. It marked a rare occasion after 1997 in which CSOs of different natures joined together in a territory-wide, loosely-organized united front, the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF). The movement saw better cooperation between the CSOs and the political society, culminating in the largest indigenous social movement in Hong Kong history.10 The movement also

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10 On July 1, 2003, an estimated 500,000 went to the streets to protest the impending enactment of the National Security (Legislative Provisions) Bill on July 9. Although it was commonly estimated that the demonstrations in support of the Beijing democracy movement in 1989 attracted crowds of up to one million, the 1989 movement was about developments in China. The movement against Article 23 thus should be considered as the largest indigenous movement, going by the number of participants, in
transformed post-1997 politics and rekindled the democracy movement in Hong Kong. The experience of CHRF, however, showed both the potential and limitations of this organizational form of loose united fronts.

The government’s proposal on Article 23 legislation in September 2002 agitated the civil society in Hong Kong. For many of the pro-democracy or liberal CSOs, it was an attempt by the government to control civil society and curtail public space. On September 13, 2002, more than 30 groups formed the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF). (Some groups joined later to make the total number to 44 groups by July 2003). The CHRF’s was meant to be a roundtable conference that could serve as a platform for groups concerned with human rights issues to discuss actions to promote human rights, but when the consultation document on Article 23 legislation was published in September 2002, the CHRF quickly focused its attention on Article 23.

The CHRF typified the organization, strengths and limitations of the counter united front as a movement organization format. The member groups of CHRF were highly diversified, with quite different backgrounds and actually quite different views on Article 23 legislation. The 44 groups by July 2003 included human rights groups (four of the 44), political groups/parties (ten), professional unions (three), religious groups (six), labor groups (four), student groups (three), feminist, gay and lesbian groups (seven), and others. The more radical groups such as the April 5th Movement (a local Trotskyist group) rejected any kind of national security legislation. The human rights groups did not see a need to legislate for China’s national security in Hong Kong, especially when and if the SAR government was not democratically elected. More moderate members such as the Democratic Party (DP) agreed in principle to enact Article 23 laws, but demanded that the government should publish a draft legislation for consultation, in the form of a White Bill, before tabling the
legislative proposals to the Legco.

The operation of the CHRF resembled many of these loose united fronts of liberal CSOs after 1997. It operated in the spirit of internal democracy and equal participation. Most decisions on collective actions were decided in the plenary meeting of the Front, participated by all the member groups, in which each member group had equally one vote. More established members, such as the DP that had 11 Legco members in 2002-03, or the Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union that had about 80,000 members by 2003, had the same voting rights as the non-registered Hong Kong Voice of Democracy that had only several members. The CHRF only had one full-time paid staff throughout the campaign against Article 23, and all its actions were manned by volunteers of the member groups. Many member groups actually abhorred any kinds of formalized organizations and preferred coordination of efforts on an *ad hoc* basis.

The wide range of opinions among member groups mean that it was difficult for the CHRF to reach a consensus on many positional issues, including whether or not to ask for a White Bill for another round of consultation by the end of 2002. The only consensus was that the member groups objected to the proposals in the consultation document and the subsequent Bill, since they generally believed that it would hurt human rights in Hong Kong. The united front format, however, allowed the different groups to reach out to their respective publics, with their own agendas and action plans, under the overall vague banner of “opposing Article 23 legislation.”

The mainstream democrats, represented by the DP, who used to lead the democracy movement and political movements in the 1980s, more or less took a back seat. Some of them thought the struggle against Article 23 could be used to rekindle

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the democracy movement, to show to Hong Kong people that a non-elected
government could pass laws that inhibit people’s freedom. They also thought that
even if the National Security Bill was going to pass, its passing would inflict a hefty
political penalty on the pro-Beijing political rivals. However, the DP adopted a
conscious strategy to refrain from taking the leadership in this movement. After
their setback in the 2000 Legco election, the DP intended to establish better links with
CSOs. They understood that quite a few CSOs had deep mistrust and suspicions
against political parties in general, and against DP in particular, and a DP-led
movement would not attract their participation. Many younger activists would not
accept their leadership, or they were reluctant to accept any leadership whatsoever.
The DP saw the CHRF format as one that could enlist the support of more civil
groups in a movement for a general cause, as days were gone when civil groups
would accept a centralized leadership by the older generation of leaders.

The CHRF experience epitomized a pluralistic form of mobilization by the new
generation of social movement. Because the contents of the National Security Bill
covered a wide range of areas, it aroused concerns from various social sectors (which
partly explained the wide variety of groups in CHRF). Human rights activists and
pro-democracy politicians were ever critical of the contents of the government
proposals, seeing them as detrimental to Hong Kong’s civil liberties. Journalists
were afraid that they could easily be guilty of “sedition” or “theft of state secrets”
with the vague definition in the Bill. Academics feared that normal research on
China could constitute “theft of state secrets”, and discussions on Tibet or Taiwan
independence could become “inciting secession”, hurting academic freedom. The
Catholic Church was worried about the proscription of links with “mainland political

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12 Based on author’s interview with Lee Wing-tat, DP Vice Chairman 2002-04, and Chairman 2004 to
present, on July 31, 2003.

13 Author’s interview with Lee Wing-tat, July 31, 2003.
organizations”, as they had a lot of links with “underground churches” in the mainland. Even university librarians were worried that they could easily be guilty of “handling seditious publications.”

The government proposals on Article 23 legislation thus led to an awakening of civil society, mobilizing different sectors to join in the movement to oppose Article 23. Under the platform format of the CHRF, many member groups could “agree to disagree”, and devised their own action plans and mobilized their own publics without agreeing on a common specific position or concerted course of action. For example, the Catholic Church opposed the legislation in a high-profile manner, with Bishop Joseph Zen criticizing the government proposals as hurting religious freedom and trying to silence political opposition. With the greenlight given by the Bishop, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese (JPCOM), the Catholic body responsible for campaigns for social justice and a CHRF member, organized discussions on Article 23 in individual churches. The Church weekly *Kung Kao Po* carried commentaries from Bishop Zen and other priests, asserting that the proposed legislation would damage religious and other freedoms in Hong Kong. Other interest groups stirred up discussions and organized activities in their respective communities.

The political parties and legislators took up the battle in the parliamentary arena. The National Security Bill was tabled to the Legco in February 2003, which was quickly passed to the Bill Committee for detailed scrutiny. With the pro-government members in the majority, the pro-democracy legislators knew very well that it was very likely for the Bill to be passed. They tried their best to expose the loopholes of the Bill in the Bill Committee meetings. In the 180 hours of Bill Committee meetings, the lengthy questioning of the contents and controversies around the Bill

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14 Author’s interview with Jackie Hung, Project Officer of JPCOM, July 29, 2003.
led to occasional outbursts of government officials in the chamber, which served to
add fuel to the already burning opposition movement. The DP also played an
important role in street-level mobilization. At the district level, the 94 ward offices
of DP legislators and District Councilors proved an important organizational resource
for the opposition movement. In weeks of mobilization effort shortly before the July
1 demonstration, the DP managed to collect phone numbers of about 40,000
supporters, and their volunteers and staff called them up one by one to call on them to
join the July 1 demonstration.\(^\text{15}\)

Other professional bodies played an important role in cognitive mobilization
during the campaign. The Hong Kong Bar Association (HKBA) and some of the
leading barristers made serious efforts to explain the problems with the Bill in public
forums and in the media. In later stages they reached out to other professional
bodies and secondary schools to explain the problems with the Bill.\(^\text{16}\) In the last two
weeks of June 2003, more and more professional groups openly called on their
members to join the July 1 protest, including academics, journalist bodies, medical
doctors, schoolteachers, accountants, social workers, film directors, artists, student
bodies, and religious groups. My survey of the major newspapers of June 2003
showed that in that month, 162 groups had openly urged support for the July 1
demonstration by issuing public statements or newspaper advertisements.\(^\text{17}\)

A lot of the mobilization was done through interpersonal channels and through
the cyberspace. Ng Chin-pong was a Form Six student in June 2003, student union
president of his own secondary school. One week before July 1, he got the
impression from various newsgroups and internet chatrooms commonly visited by
teenagers that many teenagers were really angry about Article 23 legislation. He

\(^{15}\) Author’s interview with Lee Wing-tat, July 31, 2003.

\(^{16}\) Author’s interview with Audrey Eu, senior counsel and legislator, on August 4, 2003.

\(^{17}\) Thanks are due to Mr Siu Yu-kwan for his research assistance in this survey.
then set up a website to call on fellow secondary school students to march together on July 1, 2003, and spread the message on various teenager-favored websites, newsgroups or chatrooms. Within one week he got more than 100 volunteers, whom he did not know before, who helped to relay the message through their own interpersonal networks or through the cyberspace. On July 1, 2003, more than 2,000 teenagers showed up at the “meeting point” for the secondary school students, and they marched together.

A survey of 1,154 participants of the 2003 July 1 demonstration showed that 68% of them saw interpersonal influences as an important factor that motivated them to join the march, while 54% saw “calls from the internet” (including electronic mails from friends) as important. Both channels had higher percentages than “calls from family members” (51%) and “calls from political parties” (44%) (Chan and Chung, 2003, p.9). This showed that mobilization through the internet, a channel that was difficult for the authorities to control, and which bypassed the mainstream mass media, had become a new and important channel of communication in social movements.

**Limitations of the United Front Format**

However, the CHRF format exposed its own limitations after Article 23 legislation was defeated. The democrats lost no time in trying to convert the movement against Article 23 into a full-fledged democracy movement after the July 1, 2003 march. The rally on July 9, 2003, joined by 50,000 people, put forward clear goals of fighting for universal suffrage election for the Chief Executive in 2007, and for the whole Legco in 2008. However, it was not so easy for the CHRF to be immediately converted into a united front for pushing democratic reforms.

Immediately after the July 2003 march, when the CHRF discussed to focus its next task on demanding full democracy, some of the member groups were reluctant to
join. For example, the Hong Kong Journalist Association considered itself a
professional association, and saw it inappropriate to join as a member of a coalition
for democracy movement. The Hong Kong chapter of the Amnesty International,
following the principle set by its headquarters, did not want to join domestic political
campaigns. Quite a few of the grassroot CSOs were afraid that the movement and
the CHRF platform would then be exploited by the mainstream democrats to push
their political agendas. Some grassroot CSOs were wary that the movement was
quickly transformed to one of chiefly political or constitutional concern, paying little
attention to livelihood or class issues.\textsuperscript{18} The member groups hence failed to agree
that they should become a full-fledged united front to push democratic reforms. As
a result, the CHRF did not show a strong sense of direction in the second half of 2003,
especially when in September 2003 the government announced that they were not
going to re-propose the National Security Bill in the short term.

The turn of 2004 saw a politicization of the CHRF and the campaign. The
landslide victory of the democrats in the District Council election of November 2003
and the large turnout of the January 1, 2004 rally posed great encouragements to the
participants of the political movement. The Central Government’s propaganda on
patriotism in early 2004 drove the CHRF together, as the debate heightened political
pressure on the pro-democracy camp as a whole, and focused the Hong Kong public’s
attention on political issues. However, the CHRF still failed to consolidate into a
more formal organization, resembling the Joint Committee for the Promotion of
Democratic Government, formed by various pro-democracy groups in the late 1980s.
Some of the member groups thought that the CHRF should focus on human rights
issues rather than political or constitutional issues. Core participants of the CHRF

\textsuperscript{18} Based on author’s interview with CHong Yiu-kwong, convener of CHRF since October 2004, on
January 13, 2005; and Richard Tsoi Yiu-cheong, spokesperson of CHRF from May 2003 to September
revealed that many of the smaller groups were afraid that a formal organization would be dominated by the larger and more resourceful groups. They did not want to devote their resources and time to a common secretariat or formal organization. The mutual trust between these smaller CSOs and the mainstream democrats were also too weak to form a long-term partnership and formalized organization.19

In mid-2004, it was proposed that CHRF should register as a legal society under the Societies Ordinance in Hong Kong. The idea was discussed in the CHRF general meeting, but in the end was turned down by the members on August 14, 2004. It showed the extent to which some of the member groups detested formalization and preferred an *ad hoc* form of organization. Some other groups had other concerns; say, the Human Rights Monitor wanted to maintain its independence and did not want to be a member of another formal organization. They preferred to keep the *ad hoc* form of organization, which allowed them to leave the movement any time should they find it deviating from their goals.

However, this *ad hoc* form proved unable to sustain the movement. After July 2004 the democracy movement saw a recession. The mainstream democrats were preoccupied with the September 2004 Legco election and would not participate a lot in social movements. The unsatisfactory result of the democrats in the 2004 Legco election further took the wind out of their sails, severely weakening the momentum and legitimacy claim of the democracy movement. In late 2004, the CHRF failed to find any new causes or actions to push forward the democracy movement, with its core groups in a relatively inactive situation. Core participants reflected on the weakness of this organizational form in leading a territory-wide movement. They thought that while the form was flexible and organic, and allowed the maximum

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19 Based on author’s interview with Chong Yiu-kwong on January 13, 2005; and with Richard Tsoi on January 2003.
participation of groups from different sectors and ideological flavors without subordinating to a single organization, the form did not have a stable core. Without a stable and resourceful core, the front was very dependent on the political climate or the initiative of individual resourceful groups. It was relatively difficult for this organizational form to sustain a movement for long periods of time.\(^\text{20}\)

The CHRF experience partly explained the plight of the civil society and democratic development in Hong Kong. Although the civil society in Hong Kong was vibrant and pluralistic, it had relatively weak organizational resources and weak horizontal linkage. The historical development of social movement in Hong Kong led to a detachment of the political society from the civil society, and a lack of mutual trust between CSOs and political parties. This made it difficult for the liberal CSOs to form a territory-wide formalized organization to push for progressive democratic reforms. The *ad hoc* united front format, which had become the vogue among CSOs after 1997, had its clear limitations. It was effective as a short-term alliance to fend off encroachment on the civil society, as it can coordinate CSOs of similar persuasions, and allowed them to mobilize their own respective publics with relatively low costs, with due respect to their individual differences. It was however difficult for them to accumulate enough organizational resources, experience or mutual trust to build a formidable movement. The participation was bound to be more sporadic, spontaneous, more dependent on the initiative of individual participants, while at the same time making it difficult to effect institutional changes.

\[\text{== END ==}\]

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\(^\text{20}\) Based on author’s interview with Chong Yiu-kwong on January 13, 2005; and with Richard Tsoi on January 2003.
**Table 1  Classification of Public Meetings and Processions since 1997**

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Sources: Information from Hong Kong Police and Security Bureau
### Table 2: Breakdown of United Front Actions by Areas of Concern

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<th>Sector</th>
<th>No. of Fronts</th>
<th>No. of Actions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Professional/sectoral interests</td>
<td>44 (23.16%)</td>
<td>125 (17.86%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>16 (8.42%)</td>
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<td>Human Rights</td>
<td>17 (8.95%)</td>
<td>67 (9.57%)</td>
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<td>Housing</td>
<td>24 (12.63%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>16 (8.42%)</td>
<td>31 (4.43%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>5 (2.63%)</td>
<td>20 (2.86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>5 (2.63%)</td>
<td>14 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>12 (6.32%)</td>
<td>25 (3.57%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labour Issues</td>
<td>9 (4.74%)</td>
<td>70 (10%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constitutional/Democratization</td>
<td>8 (4.21%)</td>
<td>73 (10.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>34 (17.89%)</td>
<td>129 (18.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>700</td>
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**Bibliography**


