

YAN-HO LAI

School of Law, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, United Kingdom

MING SING

Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong

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## Solidarity and Implications of a Leaderless Movement in Hong Kong:

### *Its Strengths and Limitations*

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**ABSTRACT** In 2019, what began in Hong Kong as a series of rallies against a proposal to permit extraditions to mainland China grew into a raft of anti-authoritarian protests and challenges to Beijing's grip on the city. Given the gravest political crisis confronting Hong Kong in decades, this research investigates why the protests have lacked centralized leaders and why the solidarity among the peaceful and militant protesters has been immense. This article also examines the strengths and limitations of this leaderless movement with different case studies. The authors argue that serious threats to the commonly cherished values in Hong Kong, amid the absence of stable and legitimate leaders in its democracy movement, underpinned the formation of a multitude of decentralized decision-making platforms that orchestrated the protests in 2019. Those platforms involved both well-known movement leaders organizing conventional peaceful protests and anonymous activists crafting a diversity of tactics in ingenious ways, ranging from economic boycotts, human chains around the city, artistic protests via Lennon Walls, to the occupying of the international airport. The decentralized decision-making platforms, while having generated a boon to the movement with their beneficial tactical division of labor, also produced risks to the campaign. The risks include the lack of legitimate representatives for conflict-deescalating negotiations, rise in legitimacy-sapping violence, and susceptibility to underestimating the risks of various tactics stemming from a dearth of thorough political communication among anonymous participants who had different goals and degrees of risk tolerance. In short, Hong Kong's anti-extradition movement in 2019 sheds light on the basis of leaderless movements, and on both the strengths and risks of such movements.

**KEYWORDS** leaderless movement, democratization, civil society, Hong Kong, China

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In 2019, what began in Hong Kong as a series of rallies against a proposal to permit extraditions to mainland China grew into a raft of anti-authoritarian protests and challenges to Beijing's grip on the city. Hong Kong's political crisis was kindled by an extradition bill that would permit the rendition of criminal suspects from Hong Kong to the Communist Party-controlled courts in mainland China. The pervasive rejection of the bill rapidly grew into repudiation of the undemocratic Hong Kong and Beijing governments, with the latter branding the movement a "Color Revolution." Protests have persisted, with a spiraling increase in violence in the streets, subways, airports, and other parts of this global financial hub, resulting in 6,900 arrests (Li, Leigh & Marlow, 2019) and as many as 16,000 canisters of tear gas fired by the police at protesters as of

early January 2020 (Cheng, 2020). The protesters' demands have also morphed into a full-blown anti-authoritarian clamor for full democracy.

The anti-authoritarian protests unfolding since March 2019 are the hallmark of the greatest political and confidence crisis in Hong Kong since the 1960s. As the protests evolved, not only did the largest public rally ever occur, joined by allegedly more than two million citizens, but public confidence in the Hong Kong and Chinese governments, as well as in Hong Kong's future, continued to hover at an all-time low. Violent conflicts between police and frontline militant protesters became a normal weekly event between July and November 2019, with violence from both the police and the militants gaining traction. Conflicts between riot police and black-clad protesters hurling Molotov cocktails resulted in clouds of tear gas and bloodshed.

Given the gravest political crisis confronting Hong Kong in decades, this research aims to explore why the movement has been largely a so-called leaderless movement and why the solidarity among those protesters, including both the most peaceful and the most radical ones, has been so immense. The article also explores the impact of the leaderless nature of the movement on the dynamics of the anti-authoritarian protests. Answering the aforementioned research questions will help unravel the nature of the protests in Hong Kong and the strengths and limitations of leaderless movements worldwide, as such movements have become increasingly prevalent in the digital era.

## LEADERLESS MOVEMENTS AROUND THE WORLD

During the last ten years, many of the mass demonstrations that have erupted in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East share one remarkable trait: they do not have one or a small group of core leaders, and their organization and tenets are not established in party meetings but instead emerge on social media. These are rebellions that are organized by smartphones and social media and stimulated by hashtags rather than guided by party leaders and slogans drafted by a central authority (Castells, 2015; Rachman et al., 2019). The protests in 2019 in Lebanon, Chile, France, and Algeria were arguably leaderless, enabled by digital tools and social media.

What has led to so many leaderless movements? Leaderless movements have an advantage in that it is exponentially more difficult for the government to break up the protests by isolating, harassing, arresting, or murdering the movement's leaders. Digital tools can render leaders nonessential in initiating, organizing, or mobilizing protests. However, comparative experiences suggest that while the mobilizing power of social media is a pivotal enabler of leaderless movements, the leaderless nature of the protests may also make them hard to negotiate with (Chenoweth et al., 2019). In various leaderless protests, demonstrators can have conflicting demands, making it difficult for the government to find clear targets to bargain with.

Lack of firm leadership also poses another major risk, in that leaderless struggles may more easily become violent. The escalation of violence can alienate peaceful or moderate supporters and facilitate the government's crackdown on protests. Arguably, the protests in Chile and France during 2019 played out this pattern.

More seriously, as illustrated in the many uprisings during the Arab Spring in 2011, following the demise of autocratic regimes, many leaderless movements did not have the necessary level of coherence or shared beliefs to advance their goals. These protests subsequently could not avoid becoming fractured in the post-uprising period, such as in Egypt and Yemen. Tunisia was the only exception, as the opposition forces managed to overcome entrenched ideological differences in the pursuit of their common political goal (Durac, 2015).

Any attempt to explain Hong Kong's leaderless movement of 2019 by solely relying on the prevalence of social media is plainly inadequate. In 2014, the year in which the Umbrella Movement broke out in Hong Kong, the prevalence of social media did not bring about a truly leaderless movement pushing for democracy. Although the original, planned top-down campaign was displaced by a more spontaneous student-led movement, the entire movement was dominated by two organized groups of student leaders. Before the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement, it was the norm for social movements to be organized by various organizations, including those within local pro-democracy political parties. The leaderless nature of the protests between 2019 and 2020 therefore stands out as an outlier rather than the norm. To more adequately explain the emergence of this mode of organization for protests and the high degree of unity among different pro-democratic forces, an appreciation of Hong Kong's historical context prior to 2019 is required.

#### **CONTEXT OF ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN PROTESTS IN HONG KONG: DISUNITY BEFORE 2019**

In mid-1997, Britain returned the liberal autocracy of Hong Kong to China, the largest nondemocratic country in the world. Allowing Hong Kong to become fully democratized could have created a successful democratic system, creating a demonstration effect for China's domestic provinces, and elevating the risk of one-party rule unraveling on the mainland. Although the former British government and domestic pro-democracy forces pushed for democracy before and after the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has suppressed any attempt by Hong Kong to become fully democratized since the early 1980s (Sing, 2018).

In 2003, to allow Beijing to tighten its control of Hong Kong, the puppet government of Hong Kong serving Beijing endeavored to enact a draconian national security law, which triggered a mass demonstration in protest featuring half a million Hong Kong citizens shouting for greater democracy. The protest testified to the widespread public rejection of Beijing's attempt to intensify political suppression and to escalating support for greater democracy to protect Hong Kong's freedoms, socioeconomic development, and good governance (Sing, 2005). The protest rattled Beijing and heightened its worry that Hong Kong would be transformed into a culturally subversive base against the one-party rule in China. Beijing's concern about Hong Kong's likely cultural subversion of China stirred it to ratchet up its control over Hong Kong through not only more extensive and more rapid economic integration but also overt political indoctrination

delivered in a bungled attempt to impose uncritical national education in Hong Kong in 2012 (Sing, 2018).

With the pervasive perception of diminished freedoms and the rapid deterioration in governance in Hong Kong, accompanied by repeated aborted attempts among pro-democracy forces to compel Beijing to allow Hong Kong to democratize between 1984 and 2014 via peaceful protests, some adherents of Hong Kong's democracy movement turned to more aggressive tactics. The climb in confrontations concurs with Xi Jinping's tightening grip on power in China, as he is a determined rival to democracy (Puddington, 2017). Xi has toughened Beijing's resolve to stymie not only Hong Kong's democratization but also its freedoms and judicial autonomy. Ultimately, the Hong Kong citizen's challenge to mounting authoritarian violations climaxed in the pervasively reported 79-day-long "Umbrella Movement" of 2014.

Hong Kong's youth and more educated public, like their counterparts in the West, on the whole enjoy a moderate level of post-materialism and are used to employing social media to obtain political information and views. These traits have increased their political awareness and repudiation of the deterioration in freedoms, crony capitalism, and rule of law arising from Beijing's greater political interferences. Consequently, they have become increasingly discontented with the nondisruptive pro-democracy parties and embittered about their inability to achieve greater democracy given three decades of peaceful demonstrations and tactics. The moderate and ineffective strategies of the pro-democracy parties have eroded their moral authority to champion social and political movements in the eyes of a progressive public and civil society groups (Sing, 2019). Indeed, since the mid-2000s, peaceful pro-democracy parties have been marked by their absence from a raft of preservationist, anti-developmental, and political movements; instead, these have been increasingly marshaled by young activists, including university students with more confrontational and disruptive tactics, to fight for their goals.

During the Umbrella Movement of 2014, for instance, the majority of supporters were younger and had college education. They have been more enthusiastic about using disruptive and confrontational acts to push for concessions from Beijing than the largely peaceful pro-democracy parties. The student leaders, by showing boldness and resolve during the movement, eclipsed the pro-democracy parties' leaders and their lackluster performance, winning them the mass support as the leaders of the Umbrella Movement (Sing, 2019).

#### **FROM DISUNITY TO UNITY IN FACE OF RISING AUTHORITARIAN ENCROACHMENT**

Despite the conflicts between Hong Kong's pro-democracy parties, progressive activists, and civil society bodies, similar to the conflicts in Argentina, Spain, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Korea, the mounting political intimidation from an authoritarian regime strengthened their solidarity in counteracting the escalating authoritarian encroachments (Sing, 2019). Confronted with the failure of the Umbrella Movement to force Beijing to budge on democratization, since 2019, the following contextual features have heightened the pressure for the political parties and civil society forces within the

liberal camp to unite to improve their odds of success in their struggle for freedoms, democracy, and rule of law.

During the five years after the Umbrella Movement, there were severe divisions and internal frictions in the liberal camp between those advocating peaceful and those embracing violent tactics. Different camps of the pro-democracy forces criticized each other, and the intensity of their acrimony was sometimes greater than that between the pro-democracy and pro-Beijing camps. Social media was rife with fiery attacks on pro-democracy parties. Many activists attributed the failure of the Umbrella Movement to the pro-democracy parties' preoccupation with their lucrative salary as legislators overshadowing their role as warriors for democracy. Acrimonious exchanges and mutual distrust were hallmarks of those five years of political disillusionment and the directionless democracy movement (Tam, 2019).

Mild pro-democracy parties were hard pressed to make fundamental changes in their tactics as a result of their electoral setbacks amid challenges from the more militant civil groups and new political parties during the legislative election of 2016. During the election, the entire pro-democracy camp was splintered into mild pro-democracy parties and confrontational ones, with the former suffering a dip in their seat share arising from escalating public disillusionment with their futile tactics. The rupture within the existing pro-democracy camp reflects the persistent underlying tensions between the mild, pro-democracy parties predominantly supported by the middle-aged and relatively older members of the public and the proactive, confrontational, and disruptive new parties backed by younger citizens.

The public participation in traditional and peaceful demonstrations supporting freedoms and democracy organized by moderate pro-democracy parties and civil society organizations has suffered precipitous decline. In the mass rally held on 1 July 2015, for instance, which was an annual event within which civil groups would join together to clamor for social and political rights, attendance showed a 90% contraction vis-à-vis the rally in 2014. Even when the government tightened the legislature's internal rules to the severe detriment of the pan-democrats' ability to monitor government performance in 2019, the anti-government rally was joined by only a few hundred people (Wong, 2018).

As mutual recriminations between the peaceful and militant camps led the democratic movement to a dead end, and the overwhelming political powerlessness of the public and activists amid Beijing's escalating authoritarian encroachments paralyzed the movement, different camps in the movement painstakingly came to realize that changes in tactics and greater unity were urgently needed to breathe new life and hope into the democratic crusade.

The need for a change in tactics and improvement in unity within the pro-democracy camp has become especially more pressing given that the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), with Beijing's willful reinterpretation of Hong Kong's mini-constitution, disqualified a number of elected and aspiring pro-democracy legislators from becoming legislators. This disqualification dealt a heavy blow to not only traditional and mild pro-democracy parties but also the more embryonic and militant groups, who were endeavoring to enter the legislature to advance the movement.

Overall, between the end of the Umbrella Movement in late 2014 and the beginning of the anti-authoritarian protests in early 2019, the public's dissatisfaction with the governance in general and erosion of core political values including freedoms, One Country, Two Systems, and government's political accountability in particular hovered around low levels (Lee, 2020b). The amendment of internal rules of legislature that further shields the government from legislator's monitoring (Sing, 2019), the disqualification of pro-democracy activists from running for legislature or retaining their legislative seats (Sing, 2019), the government's advocacy for using Chinese laws in the express railway terminus located in Hong Kong, and the government's equivocal stance about the kidnaps of the staff and employers of a bookstore that sold books highly critical of the CCP, have significantly undermined the public confidence in Hong Kong's future (Sing, 2019). In March 2019, the public confidence toward Hong Kong's future hit an all-time low since the launching of the same survey question from July 1997, based on the University of Hong Kong's public opinion poll (Public Opinion Programme, 2019a). Obviously, there was widespread fear among Hongkongers of losing their freedoms, rule of law, and One Country, Two Systems immediately before the anti-authoritarian movement, laying the basis for massive political mobilization when the public was triggered by a critical event.

When the HKSAR government attempted to bulldoze the extradition law in early 2019 without the normal and extensive consultation, the apprehension of the loss of fair trial and human rights acted as the lightning rod that set off the gigantic and sustained mass mobilization. In a Hong Kong-wide survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong between 29 May and 3 June 2019, 66% of the public disagreed or strongly disagreed on extraditing Hongkongers to the mainland for trials. Fifty-nine percent of the public simply had no faith in the provision of fair trials in the mainland, while 64% of the public agreed on extradition only to places that respect human rights (*Ming Pao*, 2019). At the same time, the net public trust in the HKSAR government that was increasingly perceived to do the bidding of Beijing in imposing the draconian law onto Hong Kong dropped to -32% in mid-June 2019, the lowest level since the advent of the same survey question from 1992 (Public Opinion Programme, 2019b). Obviously, the strong public aversion to the extradition law and the huge distrust toward the Chinese and Hong Kong governments have underpinned the sustainability and solidarity of the campaign.

The solidarity has been intensified by another crucial contextual factor: the largely perceived police brutality in handing the protesters. Amnesty International has condemned the police's menacing use of rubber bullets, indiscriminate pounding of protesters who did not struggle, combative tactics that obstructed journalists on-site, and the misuse of tear gas and pepper spray randomly, which was disproportionate to the level of threat faced by the police. The international body berated the police as having violated international law and standards on the use of force by law enforcement officials (Lau, 2019). There have also been multiple reports and videos pointing out that the police have obstructed rescuers and ambulances from accessing the injured during the anti-authoritarian protests, improperly handled allegations of rape and torture in custody, and

offered evasive defense of police officers acting impulsively or in retaliation against protesters (Progressive Lawyers Group, 2019).

Predicated on a number of on-site surveys of protesters performed in 2019, the public disgruntlement with the police's treatment of protesters has been a top driving force behind the protests since July 2019 (Lee et al., 2019). The public increasingly opined that the Hong Kong and Chinese governments acquiesced to and covered up the wrongdoings of the police. A survey conducted in September 2019 indicated that approximately 70% of the respondents agreed that the police had employed excessive violence, whereas only approximately 40% agreed that the protesters had used excessive violence. Equally important, close to 80% of the public agreed on the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry, while 75% supported the restart of democratic reform (Lee, 2020b).

The increasingly blatant and violent direct repression by the police has significantly sapped the public's trust toward the police and the HKSAR government. According to the longitudinal surveys of CCPOS, public trust in the police dropped markedly from 5.60 on a 0-to-10 scale in early June to just 2.89 in September 2019 (Lee, 2020b). Hence, the increasingly repressive strategies of the HKSAR government and the police have not only fueled the public wrath and distrust toward the government, but also boosted the sustainability and solidarity of the movement, as evidenced by a survey among protesters who were asked about their identification with various slogans in August 2019. The slogans "No rioters, only tyranny," "Hong Kong police know the law but break it," and "No snitching, no severing of ties" were buttressed respectively by 98.2%, 97.2%, and 86.9% among the protesters as being representative of the ethos of the movement (Lee, 2020b). Given the aforementioned contextual factors, solidarity and cooperation reached their highest intensity since they first emerged between the militant and peaceful camp in 2019 and 2020. That said, how could such a leaderless movement be organized?

## ORGANIZATION OF THE LEADERLESS MOVEMENT

In 2019, many protesters learned bitter lessons on the heels of the largely peaceful pro-democracy struggle of 2014, now branded as the Umbrella Movement, as many of its notable leaders were imprisoned. To avoid arrest or political harassment, protesters were dispersed among different social media groups in the face of widely anticipated state-led crackdowns. They used social media to organize and mobilize anonymously amid China's briskly expanding surveillance state. Once an idea gained traction online, smaller groups spun off to orchestrate action. The protesters have also used social media to gauge public opinions, which allows them to adjust and explain the intensity of their violence to avoid detaching moderate supporters (Lee, 2019).

More specifically, digital and social media tools including the encrypted messaging apps Telegram, the LIHKG online forum, and Facebook, among others, were used as pivotal communication tools to launch mobilizations and foster solidarity among the anti-authoritarian protesters (Ku, 2020). LIHKG is a popular online platform that

enables users to realize the relative popularity of different contents on the various forums. Users can shape which posts can become the most popular ones by their reading and commenting behavior. The platform has drawn enormous attention of more than 300,000 readers and movement participants, making it a powerful tool in sharing and communicating the wide assortment of ideas and emotions among a multitude of movement supporters; by linking activists online and permitting them to remain unidentified, these social media and online platforms made possible persistent mass mobilization and a large amount of tactical debates without formal organizations (Lee et al., 2019). While traditional pro-democracy political parties have organized many peaceful protests and kept up the overall momentum of the campaign, they have been eclipsed by hundreds and thousands of anonymous activists who have actively organized an assortment of mass campaigns to press the governments to budge through the abovementioned digital tools. As a result, the anti-authoritarian protests in 2019 and 2020 resembled many digitally-mediated, connective movements in different corners of the world, encompassing the Arab Spring uprisings, the Spanish Indignados movement, and Turkey's Gezi Park protests (Lee et al., 2019).

On-site survey data have proven the leaderless nature of the protests. Only 4.5% of protesters interviewed on the streets indicated they were mobilized by organizations, whereas 15.1% said they joined the protests on their own. Also, respondents tended to be heavily dependent on online forums for data and exchange concerning the demonstrations, with 75.9% treating them as one of the most popular avenues for getting information about the protests (Lee et al., 2019). Since early June 2019, protesters have proclaimed to have "no central stage" and pursued a "be water," that is, smart-play, philosophy. The latter has steered them to move strategically and dynamically across different protest sites in the metropolis. The mantras of "no central stage" and "be water" were two important morals bequeathed from the Umbrella Movement. The one of "no central stage" could permit participants with vastly different ideologies, strategic calculations, and inclinations to use violence to join and contribute to the overall campaign, without getting excluded and bogged down in exhausting internal bickering and bargaining. The second mantra of "be water" can preclude the protesters repeating the same mistake of staying in one place for too long that eventually yielded excessive public inconvenience and fundamentally eroded the public support for the movement. Noticeably, 60.6% of the participants in the anti-authoritarian protests have joined the Umbrella Movement (Lee, 2020b). Also, a survey question for the on-site protesters from mid-June to late July 2019 found 73.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that leaderless protests were better at representing respondents' voices than protests with leaders (Lee et al., 2019).

#### **DIVISION OF LABOR BETWEEN THE PEACEFUL AND MILITANT CAMPS OF PROTESTERS**

One slogan among Hong Kong's anti-authoritarian protesters in 2019 and 2020 represents a microcosm of the solidarity between different forces: "Brothers climb up the

mountain; each should work hard in their own way.” The slogan is a rallying cry for the protesters to remain united, even as different factions emerge and their tactics diverge. During the more than ten-month-long protests, the peaceful and confrontational camps have largely eschewed publicly blasting each other’s actions. Their solidarity has endured despite the unremitting flare-ups of violence as the protests progressed, when protesters hurled bricks and gasoline bombs starting in late 2019. While their solidarity has been continuously tested, their tight bondage has contrasted sharply with the much looser one during the Umbrella Movement of 2014. The predominantly mild pro-democracy parties, incentivized by the contextual elements, have actively pursued the following tactics to shore up the entire anti-authoritarian campaign.

Between March and early June 2019, the pro-democracy parties aggressively rallied the public to join a few mass rallies, accompanied by press conferences and active physical scuffles within the legislature, to defy the rationale of passing the extradition bill. Instead of just following their old script of contesting the government only with words, the pro-democracy legislators have resorted to filibustering and physical blocking to prevent pro-government officials from holding the legislative sessions, leaving at least one of them injured and hospitalized. Based on in-depth interviews, it was found that the strenuous efforts of the legislators not only alerted the public to the controversial extradition bill but also positively impressed the militant activists (Chan, 2019).

When weekly violent struggles between the police and frontline militants became the norm between July and November 2019, a number of pro-democracy legislators attempted to create a buffer between them to minimize the injury of the protesters and uphold the public’s right to demonstrate.

Some representatives of the pro-democracy party actively lobbied foreign governments, especially the United States, to pass human rights legislation to entrench human rights in Hong Kong and mitigate the power abuses of the Hong Kong and Chinese governments, as well as the those of the Hong Kong police.

Existing or former legislators of different parties from the largely peaceful camp have contributed to the establishment and running of various funds by crowdfunding to cover the legal expenses of the arrested protesters. The crowdfunding, which was named as the “612 Humanitarian Fund,” was set up and launched on 15 June 2019 by trustees who have been managing similar funds in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> As of 15 December 2019, more than 100 million Hong Kong dollars have been raised (612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, 2020).

The traditional flagship social movement coalition, that is, the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF), also played a significant role in consolidating the bonds between the two camps. The CHRF was founded in 2002, acting as a moderate, nonviolent pro-democracy major alliance with 48 pro-democracy parties and NGOs that has orchestrated mass

1. Yan-ho Lai was the convener of the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) between October 2011 and September 2012. He has been involved in the CHRF’s rally since 6 June 2019. He then took up the role of vice-convener of the CHRF between October 2019 and September 2020. He attended the press conference that launched the crowdfunding on 15 June 2019.

TABLE 1. CHRF's Mass Protests in the Anti-extradition Movement

Date	Protest	Organizer estimation of number of rally participants	Police estimation of number of rally participants
27 March 2019	1st Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	12,000	5,200
28 April	2nd Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	130,000	22,800
9 June	3rd Anti-extradition Protest (March) of CHRF	1,030,000	240,000
16 June	4th Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	2,000,001	338,000
1 July	Annual 7.1 Rally a.k.a. 5th Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	550,000	190,000
21 July	6th Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	430,000	138,000
18 August	7th Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	1,700,000	No figure was provided by police
8 December	Human Rights Day Rally/8th Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	800,000	183,000
1 January 2020	New Year Rally, also known as the 9th Anti-extradition Protest (CHRF)	1,030,001	60,000

Sources: Research based on WiseNews.

rallies since 2003 (CHRF, <https://www.civilhrfront.org/>). A secretariat with a convener and four vice-conveners working on a voluntary basis runs the alliance and decides on protest actions, while member organizations participate in deliberation during general meetings and provide manpower to assist rallies. The CHRF has been a loose umbrella of pro-democracy civil society organizations, rather than a highly centralized coalition.

During the course of anti-extradition protests, CHRF organized lawful and peaceful protests and managed to gain support among mainstream peace-loving, nondisruptive protesters. The turnout at the multiple protests it organized has been enormous, including a record-breaking protest of reportedly more than two million participants in a city of 7.4 million residents (Table 1). Such mass protests have played a pivotal role in maintaining the movement's momentum, keeping enormous pressure on the government, and capturing international attention. In terms of mobilization, however, the Front's role is limited. The Front applied for permission for those assemblies and rallies, booked assembly venues, liaised with licensed medical rescue teams, decided the protest dates and routes, and announced the protest themes alongside arrangements in press conferences. It did not provide substantive details of protest tactics such as gearing, preventive measures against countermobilization or slogans on banners, since political groups, citizens, and netizens would discuss and suggest by themselves.<sup>2</sup>

2. Yan-ho Lai has observed the rally preparation of CHRF's secretariat since June 2019.

However, the CHRF did not play a leading role in the anti-authoritarian movement of 2019 and 2020, which was highly decentralized in its mobilization and strategizing. Its decentralized nature can be explained by three causes. First, digital media platforms were more significant in decentralizing movement mobilizations, as reflected empirically. In a survey conducted under the Chinese University of Hong Kong in June 2019, while 72% of respondents recognized the importance of the CHRF in the movement, digital media platforms such as online forum LIHKG (91.6%), Facebook (75.1%), and Telegram (78.2%) gained higher rates in terms of the perceived importance in the movement among them (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, 2020, pp. 55–56).<sup>3</sup> Second, the CHRF's mobilization was significantly constrained by the closure of political opportunities in summer 2019 when Hong Kong's police commissioner began to continue to object to its holding of rallies and assemblies. After the rally on 1 July 2019, the CHRF's rallies were compelled by the police to have a more limited geographic scope, or a shorter duration, if not simply banned under different grounds. For instances, the CHRF's rally held on 21 July was forced to be shortened, alongside its proposed rally scheduled for 18 August was banned and only a lawful assembly was allowed in Victoria Park. The CHRF's applications for the letters of no objections regarding marches on 31 August, 1 October, and 20 October were just banned (Chung, Su, Lum & Carvalho, 2019; Lew, 2019; Chung, 2019). In response, a raft of ingenious movement tactics was raised and discussed via digital media by tens of thousands of anonymous protesters in a bottom-up manner, who did not passively rely on the increasingly constrained the CHRF. As unfolded below, some of those creative tactics were translated into actions. Third, the CHRF's leadership was challenged after holding the two million people's march in mid-June 2019. The CHRF once called for a general strike from 12 June 2019 onward to push the government to withdraw the extradition bill (Stand News, 2019b). When the government announced the postponement of the passage of the bill on 15 June, CHRF canceled the general strike in the following week. Yet the CHRF's decision provoked backlashes from both the netizens and some NGOs who perceived CHRF having compromised after the government decision. Subsequently, the CHRF publicly apologized for the "miscommunication of information" and decided to set up an information center outside the Legislative Council Complex instead of hosting the general strike (Stand News, 2019c).

The incident revealed CHRF's limited capacity and role in the movement leadership. For both members of CHRF and protesters, they see CHRF as a platform rather than the commander of the movement. CHRF did not position itself as the core organizer of the movement after June, although it has been repeatedly highlighted as the key organization in the movement by foreign media. Alternatively, CHRF supported the decentralized movement by promoting solidarity and coordinating legal supports for protesters.

CHRF strongly espoused the principle of "no split with and no condemnation of the militant activists." It has reiterated its sympathetic understanding of militants' more

3. The question asked was "How important are the roles of the following organizations and platforms to this Movement?"

aggressive tactics in face of the rising police brutality and state-led repression. After the storming at the Legislative Council Complex on 1 July 2019, the Front urged citizens to “stand on the side of egg” and “stay on the same boat,” and offered support for the frontline protesters who broke into the complex (Civil Human Rights Front, 2019a). Although the police objected to the holding of subsequent protests initiated by the Front owing to their vocal support for the militant protesters, the Front did not compromise. On 11 August, riot police brutally arrested myriads of militant protesters in different sites. To boost the morale of the protesters, netizens in LIHKG called for another peaceful rally. One week later, the Front held a solidarity assembly, partly as a response to the netizens’ demand. During the assembly, participants addressed slogans of “Woh (peaceful protesters) and Yuhng (confrontational/militant protesters) are in one family,” while protesters dressed in black and covered with gear hugged the moderates. Ultimately, 1.7 million citizens attended the rally.

CHRF also set up a hotline for a pro bono legal visits team to assist the arrested protesters. The team was set up in an ad hoc manner. The CHRF contacted some barristers and solicitors after April 2019, who then formed a network to recruit lawyers willing to provide pro bono legal visits in a police station.<sup>4</sup> While the legal visits team handled assignments for lawyers, the Front provided a hotline for family members and friends of the arrested. After receiving personal information from the hotline, the legal visits team locates the arrested person in one of the many police stations, meets with and advises them, accompanies them when they make statements before police officers, and, if necessary, appears for them in courts. The team, consisting of more than 80 lawyers, served more than 1,900 arrested persons in the first six months of protest (Civil Human Rights Front, 2019b). After the first pro bono legal visit, lawyers of the legal visits team who continue to serve the arrested can be paid from the 612 Humanitarian Fund. Professional assistance to frontline protesters serves as a form of support for the movement.

The solidarity and mutual respect demonstrated during the anti-authoritarian protests has significantly elevated the tolerance of peaceful parties and civic bodies for the leaderless movement. While veteran political parties and social movement organizations continued to play a part in the movement, a wide repertoire of creative tactics, ranging from the most peaceful to the most radical ones, have been initiated by anonymous supporters of the movement whose mobilization was abetted by digital media. The anonymous supporters have significantly sustained the momentum of the ten-month-long campaign, and harbored a strong sense of initiative to continue with the campaign with individual and collective acts. They have thus filled in the gap left by the enfeebled CHRF, a host of traditional civil society organizations. The following section reviews a number of those creative actions and discusses their strengths and limitations. The first tactic worthy of elaboration is the political consumerism.

4. Yan-ho Lai has observed the operation of the CHRF hotline for a pro bono legal visits team since June 2019.



FIGURE 1. Google search of “boycott” in Hong Kong. Source: Google search.

## POLITICAL CONSUMERISM - YELLOW ECONOMIC CIRCLE

An ingenious tactic used by many creative activists during this leaderless movement has been political consumerism, in which the protesters have split Hong Kong’s economy into pro- and anti-government camps. After approximately seven months of protests, the pro-democracy protesters have labeled restaurants or retailers as within the “yellow economic circle,” while identifying the pro-government protesters as members of the “blue economic circle.” The tenet is that supporters of the campaign will selectively go to those restaurants and retailers that support their causes and boycott “blue” businesses that supported the police and the establishment (Wong, 2020).

Economic boycotts, or politically driven consumerism, refers to behaviors aiming to achieve social, economic, or political change through economic consumption. Literature abounds discussing the role of political consumerism in various struggles in South Africa and more than a dozen other countries (Klotz, 1999). Consumer unions, nongovernmental organizations, and individual activists in various countries around the world are devoted to forging a more equal marketplace and formulating a politics of consumption that fulfills both individual and societal needs (Hilton, 2009; Fonteneau et al., 2010).

Encouraging citizens to create political pressure by collectively boycotting goods or services of pro-Beijing businesses was not a novel tactic. In 2014, several social media apps were created during the Umbrella Movement that encouraged the participants to boycott more than 25 pro-Beijing restaurants. During 2019, faced with the exhausting, costly, and uncertain anti-authoritarian protests, various social media apps were again publicized starting in the summer of 2019, advocating boycotts. As shown in Figure 1, the failure of the peaceful and violent movements to quickly win political concessions and the sharply rising personal costs of bloody confrontations with the well-weaponized police may have increasingly drawn public attention to the use of the boycott, as evidenced by the sharp hike in the keyword search via google for “yellow economy” since mid-October 2019.

How widely has the public, especially protesters, supported the use of political consumerism? In a survey of participants in an anti-authoritarian protest conducted in January 2020, 71.1% had frequently or consistently engaged in political consumerism to support yellow shops, while 86.8% had engaged against shops supporting the government or originating capital from China. Engagement with political consumerism has been especially prevalent among the younger generation, that is, those under the age of 26, with 76.2% of them often supporting yellow shops (Lee, 2020a).

That said, given that the yellow economy is mainly concentrated in restaurants and that restaurants plus the wholesale and retail industries accounted for only approximately

4.2% of local GDP in 2018, the capacity of protesters to yield meaningful pressure on the government has been heavily constrained (Hui, 2019). This is especially true because some local large businesses, including Cathay Pacific, have adopted a hostile stance against protesters and their sympathizers. Cathay has fired more than a dozen employees for simply posting messages outside of office hours supporting the protesters on personal social media pages on sites such as Facebook. Many international banks and local businesses have also taken great care not to antagonize the Chinese government during the protests to protect their business interests in China's huge market. Foreign and local banks—for instance, Barings, JPMorgan, and HSBC—have treaded warily as tensions rise in Hong Kong and protests opposing an extradition bill metamorphose into the mass repudiation of China's hold over Hong Kong (Liu & Hu, 2019). Therefore, it has been hard for the yellow economy to capture the professional services sector that comprises legal, medical, financial, and other services, which together constitute 30% of Hong Kong's GDP (Hui, 2019).

Additionally, incessant debates continue on whether a certain restaurant is truly a yellow restaurant, as no single labor union or pro-democracy party has thus far managed to provide reliable certification of the yellow or blue labels. The lack of credible certification may have further subdued the impact of the political consumerism tactic on the government. The next tactic concerns the Lennon Wall, a lively and colorful form of artistic protest appearing throughout Hong Kong.

#### **ARTISTIC PROTEST - LENNON WALLS IN 18 DISTRICTS**

Artistic protest is another tactic in the anti-extradition movement of Hong Kong aiming to maintain the immense solidarity between the peaceful and the radical protesters. The arts and social movements are highly connected as many artworks and artistic activities that reengaged arts with their political power had been produced by protesters and professional artists in occupy movements across the world (Pang, 2020, p. 89). Taking Hong Kong's occupy movement in 2014 as an example, Pang suggested that the artworks appeared in the movement were not just "made to support some political movement that is taking place somewhere else—they are the political movement" (Pang, 2020, p. 89).

One of the artistic protests in Hong Kong was the creation of a "Lennon Wall." The wall was one of the icons in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, when protesters wrote political messages to express their beliefs, feelings, and attitudes toward the occupy movement on sticky notes attached to the walls outside government headquarters. Inspired by the John Lennon Wall in Prague, the Hong Kong Lennon Wall was created not only as an arts exhibition but also as a political space for practicing cultural activism (Pang 2016; Kurfürst 2018; Patsiaouras, Veneti & Green, 2018; Wong & Liu, 2018; Ho, 2019; Valijakka, 2019).

The Hong Kong Lennon Wall was reborn in 2019, and walls blossomed across the city in the course of the anti-extradition movement. Protesters set up a Lennon Wall in Admiralty, where police repression occurred on 12 June 2019. The Lennon Wall became a landmark of protest until the end of June, when pro-government groups destroyed the



FIGURE 2. Locations of the “Lennon Walls” in Hong Kong: Red, New Territories; Blue, Kowloon; Green, Hong Kong Island; Gray, Removed Lennon Walls. Source: <https://bit.ly/3eK7Ppa> [last updated on 2 September 2019].

TABLE 2. Locations of the “Lennon Walls” in Hong Kong

Locations	Number of “Lennon Wall” sites
Hong Kong Island	35
Kowloon	45
New Territories	74
Total	154

Source: <https://bit.ly/3bx5dZM> (last updated 2 September 2019; accessed 23 September 2020).

posts and janitors were ordered to remove all of them. However, after the storming of the Legislative Council Complex on 1 July, citizens commenced to create Lennon Walls in 18 districts, using various public spaces, pedestrian areas and even inside shopping malls. The widespread dispersion of Lennon Walls is a leaderless and bottom-up action. Designers produced graphics and artworks and circulated the works on social media. Others then placed printed posters and visual arts that describe and advocate for the anti-extradition movement on the Lennon Walls to attract the attention of passersby. Volunteers also invited passersby to write sticky notes demonstrating their support for the frontline protesters and their political demands (Yu, 2019). In three months, Lennon Walls were set up in more than 154 locations across different districts of Hong Kong (see Figure 2 and Table 2).

The Lennon Walls have served as a platform to strengthen the bonds among protesters in three ways. First, they broadened understanding of the movement among citizens who lacked knowledge about the development of the protests. Passersby became more aware of the movement due to the infographics, visual arts, and propaganda on the Lennon Walls (Inmediahk, 2019). Sympathy for the frontline protesters, who may have previously been seen as violent, was reported to have deepened in the community (HKdoujin, 2019). Mutual support was also strengthened when peaceful protesters and moderate supporters used the Lennon Walls to convey their expectations to the frontline protesters.

Moreover, the Lennon Walls reshaped public space into a site of political struggles, revealing state-sponsored violence while unifying the movement. The blossoming of the Lennon Walls seems to have induced incidents where pro-government groups removed slogans and posters from the walls and attacked the volunteers who created the walls (Cheung & Sum, 2019). The pro-government camps' attacks on the Lennon Walls, although a brutal experience for protest supporters, engendered movement solidarity. Peaceful supporters of the movement shared a common experience with the militant protesters of physical suffering and legal consequences. They were unified in the face of state violence.

In addition, the sense of political citizenship among citizens was enhanced by the Lennon Walls. The division of labor between professional designers, netizens, and local residents when establishing Lennon Walls allowed the movement's supporters to exercise their creative expression and a plurality of political beliefs apart from mass mobilization. Defending the Lennon Walls from state repression also became a form of civil resistance to protect the freedom of expression. Public engagement and the performance of citizenship become a struggle in everyday life. The next two eye-drawing tactics relate to two other forms of artistic protest, the encircling of Hong Kong by tens of thousands of citizens and the singing of a symbolic "anthem."

#### **SOLIDARITY PROTEST: "THE HONG KONG WAY" AND "GLORY TO HONG KONG"**

In the summer of 2019, protesters called for various solidarity protest actions to consolidate the bonds among protesters from both the peaceful and the confrontational camps and to raise awareness alongside support in other parts of the world. "The Hong Kong Way" and "Glory to Hong Kong" are two overt instances of these actions.

##### **"The Hong Kong Way"**

"The Hong Kong Way" was a protest action that formed human chains across the city. It was inspired by "the Baltic Way" of 1989, when more than two million citizens in the Baltic States formed a 600-kilometer-long human chain across the Baltic States expressing their demand for national independence from the Soviet Union ([thebalticway.eu](http://thebalticway.eu)).

In mid-August, a post on the protest-navigating forum LIHKG called for the creation of human chains to echo the Baltic Way. The post also urged participants to uphold peaceful, rational, and nonviolent principles to attract foreign media attention to their

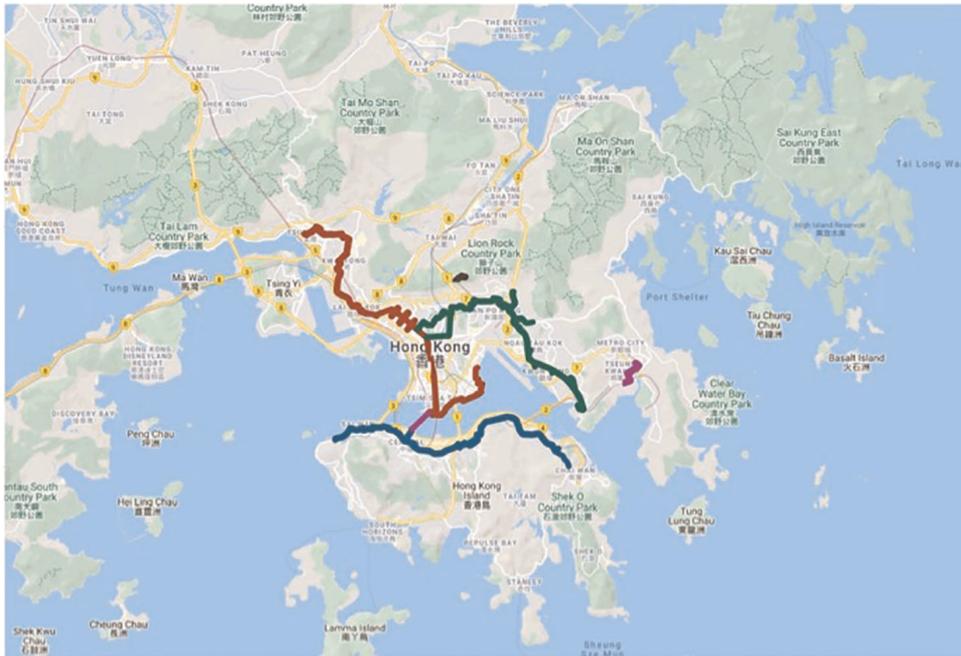


FIGURE 3. Google Map of “The Hong Kong Way” on 23 August 2019. Source: <https://bit.ly/3byWqGS>

TABLE 3. Estimation of Length and Number of Participants in the Hong Kong Way

Route (mirroring the lines of the Mass Transit Railway of Hong Kong)	Estimated length	Estimated number of participants	Estimated number of participants after weighting (+/-10%)
Hong Kong Line	14.3 km	14,300	12,870-15,730
Tsuen Wan Line	10.03 km	10,030	9027-11,033
Kwun Tong Line	13.8 km	13,800	12,420-15,180
Total	45.03 km	45,030	40,527-49,533

Source: <https://bit.ly/354U6VC> (last updated 23 August 2019; accessed 23 September 2020).

demands. The post gained more than 4,500 likes as an endorsement (LIHKG, 2019). Netizens commenced to mobilize themselves by publishing propaganda materials online, forming Telegram groups and channels to disseminate information on logistics. The human chain action was held on 23 August 2019, five days after the announcement of the action. Protesters joined hands with each other across major districts of the city, singing protest songs, chanting their demands, and waving their mobile phones. Some protesters formed human chains on the landmark mountain of Lion Rock (Hale, 2019). Anonymous organizers from Telegram estimated that more than 45,000 participants built a 45-kilometer-long human chain that night (see Figure 3 and Table 3).

One of the organizers of the Hong Kong Way explained that forming a human chain as a spontaneous action is meaningful to the movement because it not only echoes other historical events but also deepens the movement in the community (*Breakazine*, 2019). The “Hong Kong Way” encouraged many citizens to emulate this action, which is less confrontational and a cost-effective way to create visual support to the protest movement and thus address media attention. Since early September 2019, high school students have organized human chain actions in the early mornings for schoolmates. Additional human chain actions were proposed and enacted in October, November, and New Year’s Eve 2019.<sup>5</sup> The decentralized leadership of the protest has opened space for innovating movement tactics from the bottom up.

### “Glory to Hong Kong”

Chanting songs is a common way to express solidarity and political demands in rallies worldwide. Singing per se can be a protest tactic, such as the “Singing Revolution” in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which occurred alongside the Orange Revolution in Ukraine ([singingrevolution.com](http://singingrevolution.com)). The song “Glory to Hong Kong” written by an anonymous netizen, echoes the above experiences and became the theme song of the anti-extradition movement. The writer made a post in LIHKG to recruit music engineers and volunteers to record the song on 26 August 2019 and then uploaded it to YouTube on 31 August 2019. The song quickly became an anthem to unite the protesters and their supporters, strengthening people’s commitment to striving for democracy and freedom with blood and sweat. Chanting “Glory to Hong Kong” thus became a protest action in rallies, shopping malls, soccer matches, and even high schools. Within two weeks, the original video of the song obtained more than two million view counts (Dgx music, 2019a).

How can a song become a powerful instrument to strengthen movement solidarity? First, the lyrics narrate the common experiences of repression, state conviction in the values and goals of the movement, and incorporate the well-known protest slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times.” The song bridged, reenergized, and united the militant camp and the moderate camp (BBC News, 2019a); it was even praised as a “national anthem” by some protesters (Leung, 2019), illustrating its iconic significance to the movement.

The song reinforced international attention on the development of the Hong Kong protests when it was translated into various languages and used by movement supporters overseas. Anti-extradition protests overseas often play the song in their own language to attract foreigners’ interest and boost the morale of protesters (Dgx music, 2019b).

The song has also inspired a new form of political participation. After the launch of “Glory to Hong Kong,” based on the author’s interview, a professional in music, who was well connected to musicians and singers, managed to recruit 200 singers and musicians and record the orchestral version of the song in 48 hours. Based on the author’s in-depth

5. Routes and descriptions of human chains action between August and December 2019 can be found in the “Mobilization Map” at the website “AntiELAB Research Data Archive,” Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2AIA1bk> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

interview with one of the singers, the organizer was not connected to the CHRF. He has acted out the idea after noting a suggested post in LIHKG that an orchestral version should be produced for the song.<sup>6</sup> The 60 musicians and singers who finally attended and sang the song were all dressed in black, that is, the usual clothes for the peaceful and radical protesters, to express their support for the movement (Stand News, 2019a). The recruitment attracted people from the music industry to participate in the anti-extradition movement, connecting the movement with popular culture (Black Blorchestra, 2019). Furthermore, chanting “Glory to Hong Kong” in various places became a low-cost act, as people could gather and sing the song with simple sound amplifiers and instruments at shopping malls and in neighborhoods. The popularity of “Glory to Hong Kong” was amplified when pro-Beijing groups began to chant China’s national anthem and songs praising the CCP at shopping malls, leading to conflicts with pro-movement citizens (Kirby, 2019). The bonds between frontline protesters and movement followers were consolidated by the power of music.

The wide dispersion of the Lennon Walls, in conjunction with the popularity of the Hong Kong Way and “Glory to Hong Kong,” has further popularized and sustained the movement by a stable size of committed protest participants, as demonstrated by a series of on-site surveys conducted during protests between July and December 2019 (Table 4). Finally, the last tactic for discussion includes physical scuffles and an international dimension—the occupying of one of the busiest airports in the world.

#### OCCUPYING THE AIRPORT

One distinctive character of the anti-extradition movement was the agency of protesters in turning a multitude of everyday micro-spaces into sites of resistance, varying from Lennon Walls, to shopping malls, to the airport (Ku, 2020). The occupation of the Hong Kong International Airport illustrates the organic division of labor between peaceful and confrontational protesters but also reveals its weaknesses as a leaderless movement.

The Hong Kong International Airport was a significant protest site of channeling the protest motivations and demands to foreign visitors who were an audience of the international battlefield in the protest. Netizens initiated a silent protest inside the arrival hall, displaying news reports of the anti-extradition protests to the arriving passengers on 15 June 2019, the eve of the two million protesters’ march. In late July 2019, netizens began to call for another peaceful sit-in at the arrival hall of the airport. The sit-in aimed to express public outrage at the government’s reluctance to withdraw the extradition amendment bill and to condemn the violent repression of protesters by the police and their inaction on the alleged attacks by thugs on protesters and civilians inside a subway station in the New Territories. During the sit-in protest, demonstrators, including aviation staff and unionists, played video clips of the movement and displayed signs and slogans in different languages to warn tourists to “not trust the police or the government”

6. Ming Sing interviewed a singer in the orchestra on 25 May 2020.

TABLE 4. Protest Actions That Respondents of On-Site Surveys Took in 2019 (Question: Throughout the Movement, since June up until now, have you ever participated in the following activities?)

	Express opinions on Lennon Walls (%)	Join human chains (%)	Sing "Glory to Hong Kong" in public (%)
27 July	61.3	NA	NA
4 August (TKO)	60.1	NA	NA
4 August (SW)	63.6	NA	NA
10 August	69.3	NA	NA
11 August	66.5	NA	NA
13 August	68.7	NA	NA
16 August	70.3	NA	NA
18 August	59.7	NA	NA
25 August	67.5	NA	NA
31 August	66.0	NA	NA
8 September	66.8	NA	NA
15 September	67.6	64.0	78.2
28 September	69.1	64.9	80.5
1 October	61.6	61.4	77.0
14 October	67.2	64.0	86.1
20 October	56.6	57.8	79.4
8 December	60.7	61.3	78.9

Source: Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey 2020, *Research Report on Public Opinion during the Anti-Extradition Bill (Fugitive Offenders Bill) Movement in Hong Kong*, 52–53.

(Kuo, 2019). Protesting inside the airport became possible because of the decentralized network for information flow and the online strategizing and decision-making processes conducted through Telegram. To announce verified information to protesters in the absence of centralized leadership, a Telegram channel had dozens of users who did not previously know each other and who effectively fact-checked multimedia materials provided by the “whistle-blowers” from the aviation sector (Tien, 2019).

Seeing the strategic value of protesting at the airport, the state reacted by legal intervention in order to stop protesters from entering the halls. Rallies inside the airport became more contentious when the Airport Authority disapproved of sit-ins in August 2019. Even so, thousands of protesters continued to host assemblies in the arrival and departure halls, rallying against the police’s brutal mass arrest of protesters. The Airport Authority had to cancel flights after some protesters blocked the path to the boarding area (BBC News, 2019b). During the sit-ins, a Chinese journalist was suspected of being

an agent of the Chinese government and assaulted by some protesters. The attack caused backfire from pro-democracy lawmakers as well as the journalist community and was amplified by the Chinese media, who blamed Hong Kong protesters for being rioters (*Global Times*, 2019). The Airport Authority subsequently applied a court injunction to prohibit all protest activities that obstructed operation inside the hall (Reuters, 2019).

In response to the court injunction, protesters changed their tactics to assemble outside the airport on 1 September 2019. While protesters set roadblocks to paralyze the roads surrounding the airport, police locked down all major public transport services to the airport and started to arrest protesters. As a result, thousands of protesters were trapped, having no choice but to leave the site on foot and walk for over 10 kilometers along the highway to avoid arrests. At night, a multitude of drivers heeded Telegram's call to "rescue" the protesters. Hundreds of vehicles drove slowly to jam traffic on the bridge that connected the airport to downtown, preventing the police from pursuing the protesters. Protesters were also picked up by other drivers leaving the site, turning this act of evacuation into Hong Kong's "Dunkirk evacuation" (Lam, 2019).

Two weaknesses of a leaderless protest action were revealed in the occupation at the airport. Radical actions within the protest became unmanageable without firm leadership. The attempts to disrupt passengers entering the boarding areas caused a backlash from foreign media, and the attack against a Chinese journalist also led to widespread condemnation of the protesters for violence against civilians. Without organized leadership, no one had the legitimacy or representativeness to defend these radical actions, and thus these unexpected conflicts eclipsed protesters' demands in the airport rally and helped legitimize the court injunction.

Before occupying the roads outside the airport, protesters were not informed of the suspension of all public transport services between the airport and the city. An exit plan was not prepared prior to the action. Although most protesters escaped through ad hoc help from hundreds of drivers, protesting outside the airport showed the cost of a disorganized action without clear leadership.

The five tactics have testified in part to the leaderless nature of this movement, that is, the lack of a small number of stable and centralized leaders of Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests, when movement actions have been predominantly initiated and mobilized via digital media platforms. Veteran pro-democracy figures and groups played only a secondary role to support the actions, when mobilizations and decision-making were coordinated by anonymous protesters who constituted a networked social movement (see Table 5).

## CONCLUSION

This article explains the emergence of a leaderless movement in Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests and describes the dynamics underpinning the solidarity among protesters who varied enormously in their levels of militancy and choices of movement tactics. Given the disjointed nature of the democracy movement, the legitimacy of traditional pro-democracy parties as movement leaders was eroded before the start of

TABLE 5. Summary of Five Protest Tactics in the Anti-extradition Movement

Protest actions	Origin	Mobilization platform	Decision-making platform	Role of traditional social movement organizations	Role of pro-democracy parties
Yellow Economic Circle	LIHKG	Telegram, Facebook, websites, and mobile apps		Promotion via digital media platforms	Promotion via digital media platforms and personal participation
Lennon Walls	LIHKG	Telegram groups and channels	Telegram groups	Promotion via digital media platforms	Promotion via Facebook Page and district councils
The Hong Kong Way	LIHKG	Telegram groups and channels	Telegram groups	Promotion via digital media platforms	Promotion via digital media platforms
Singing "Glory to Hong Kong"	LIHKG	Telegram groups and channels	Telegram groups	Promotion via digital media platforms	Legislators and district councilors monitor the protest sites
Occupying the Airport	LIHKG	Telegram groups and channels	Telegram groups	Promotion via digital media platforms	Did not promote nor publicly support the action

the campaign. However, there was an overriding need for supporters of the movement to maintain unity in the face of Beijing's escalating repression of the dissenters in Hong Kong. Comparative studies in Argentina, Spain, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Korea have shown that despite the tensions between various pro-democracy forces in civil and political society, their solidarity in advancing democratization has been found in such places, in order to effectively counter the powerful authoritarian governments (Kim, 2000; Levitsky, 2001).

With an absence of stable and legitimate leaders, the protests in Hong Kong are marked by a multitude of decentralized decision-making platforms involving both well-known leaders organizing traditional peaceful rallies and many anonymous activists actively crafting ingeniously diverse tactics and mobilizing fellow citizens to join in the multitude of protests. The decentralized decision-making platforms have generated a clear tactical division of labor, with traditional pro-democracy parties and a social movement alliance embracing peaceful tactics, while many anonymous protesters pursued more militant ones. This case study of Hong Kong demonstrates the importance of a decentralized strategizing and decision-making mechanism among protesters, especially under a nondemocratic structure. As illustrated in the case of producing and singing of the symbolic anthem, the online forum LIHKG has generated many creative tactics, with some of them having been tempting enough to be brought to fruition by hundreds if not thousands of anonymous concerned citizens. There is no evidence to prove that one or

two formal organizations was the “black hand” coordinating the abovementioned creative tactics. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, the authors have also found that the CHRF did not get involved in organizing the yellow economic circle, the protests of the Lennon Wall and human chains, the production of the anthem, and the occupying of the airport. Even the conveners of CHRF remained as ordinary participants in human chain actions and sit-ins at the airport.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the hundreds and thousands of anonymous citizens, prompted by their grave concern about the rapid and enormous erosion of freedoms, rule of law, and One Country, Two Systems, voluntarily and selectively joined various activities.

As highlighted in a study of other cases of similar movements (Engler & Engler, 2017, p. 283), Hong Kong’s leaderless movement exemplifies that to “spark, amplify and harness mass protest,” decentralized networks can launch multiple activities of mobilization, maintain tension via disruption, and work with traditional organizations to sustain a campaign. The common enormous threat and repression from the largest authoritarian juggernaut on earth enabled Hong Kong’s leaderless movement to exhibit resilience and solidarity among both anonymous and well-known protesters and organizations while permitting various tactics with different degrees of violence and innovation to play out and sustain the movement.

A leaderless movement, however, as illustrated in this case study, exhibits three features that may undercut its chance of success. The major tolerance of violent tactics with the aim of maintaining solidarity in the face of a juggernaut runs the risk of inviting further escalation of violence, thereby alienating the pivotal mass support needed to win the battle. The widespread vandalism, occasional attacks on not only police officers but also dissenting civilians, and subsequent widespread use of petrol bombs have eroded public support for the protests. If the erosion of public support continues, the risk of losing the backing of moderate supporters will mount.

Second, the variations in goals, and the perceived effectiveness of tactics and inadequate political communication within a leaderless movement, can invite tactical pitfalls and unintended costs, hence raising the personal cost for participants and the odds of fracturing the movement. The impromptu and perilous retreat of thousands of activists from the airport in the face of unforeseen and powerful police containment, which resulted in mass arrests, illustrates the jeopardy of a lack of organized and well-strategized leadership.

Finally, given the heightened difficulty for the government in identifying representatives from a leaderless protest movement for negotiation, such protests may be more likely to morph into a stalemate or an uncompromising, all-out confrontation. The government may also be more motivated to engage in either a strategy of attrition or an all-out attempt to crush the protests.

7. See footnote 2.

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