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Emergent Political Issues in Hong Kong

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EMERGENT POLITICAL ISSUES IN HONG KONG

by

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SOCIAL CHANGE, BUREAUCRATIC RULE, AND EMERGENT
POLITICAL ISSUES IN HONG KONG

The social and political institutions which have served Hong Kong eminently since the Second World War are becoming more and more ineffectual in managing an increasingly complex urban-industrial society. For many years, the social-political system of Hong Kong has been characterized by the juxtaposition of a bureaucracy on the one side, which monopolizes political power but professes economic laissez-faire and social non-interventionism. And an atomistic Chinese society on the other, which is relatively capable of meeting many of the ordinary needs of the people.¹ The political and social sectors in Hong Kong are quite clearly demarcated, and are linked by a thin layer of mediating structures. Secular changes in both the bureaucracy and Chinese society have been going on continuously in past decades, but only in recent years have the political repercussions of these changes become more evident. The thrust of these changes includes an enlarged public sector, a rationalized bureaucratic administration, and a Chinese society which, more individualistic and fragmented than before, suffers from loosened social control and an incapacity to manage its own affairs. All these changes are in varying degrees induced by the inexorable process of modernization spearheaded by a fast-growing economy. More ominously, there seems to emerge amid these changes a gradual shift in popular ethos a growing concern which casts doubt on the legitimacy of the social-political system, particularly its distributive aspects.

The political consequences of these transformations are: a

voluminous quantity of political demands made by the Chinese populace which overload both the government and existing mediating structures, a large backlog of unmet needs and a people more and more alienated from the social-political system. There is a pervasive feeling of defeatism, frustration and powerlessness in the Chinese society, notably among the educated and disadvantaged. Until now, these feelings have been hazy and unfocused, but they are sufficiently unsettling to activate some isolated, desultory efforts at problem definition and solution. They sporadically find expressive outlets in concrete issues and congeal into collective actions against the government. This development understandably worries a government which is used to basing its legitimacy primarily on its ability to meet the needs of the populace.

With frustration and alienation on the rise, it is natural to hear calls for increased popular participation in public decision-making as the panacea for societal ills. These calls are advanced in general by a small number of individuals and groups of middle-class composition. However, these exhortations can be interpreted more as expressions of dismay than as programmatic battle-cries of politically ambitious groups with the ability to mobilize mass support. Despite the momentous changes Hong Kong has undergone in the past decades, there are as yet no fundamental, visible changes in the alignment of existing forces or the entry of new forces into the political arena. The basic features of the old social-political system still remain essentially intact, though its problem-solving capacity has demonstrably declined. Demands for fundamental restructuring of the political system appear

ill-advised. To extricate Hong Kong from its current predicament, changes are necessary, and they have to be initiated by a more informed, innovative, imaginative and determined government with the ability to mobilize support from the people.

The Social-Political System:
Fundamental Features

Though to a certain extent an oversimplification, post-1945 Hong Kong can be succinctly conceptualized as a minimally-integrated social-political system with a compartmentalization of the political and social realms. Such a system receives general acceptance, which explains its legitimacy. Political power is controlled by a government which is inclined to confine its application to only a select set of "essential" functions, revolving largely around law and order and the provision of some basic social and urban services required by a capitalist economy. In general, the government prefers to limit its involvement as far as possible in both the economy and Chinese society.

The Chinese society of Hong Kong is overwhelmingly composed of immigrants and their offspring. Motivated primarily by economic aspirations, the Chinese populace are blatantly utilitarian in inclination and passionately apolitical or anti-political. Utilitarianism and instrumentalism not only influence relationships with outsiders, the government, and the society as a whole, they also creep in to mould interpersonal relationships within the family, particularly toward those family members whose ties with the "core" members are less close or whose membership is achieved through fictive

kinship ties.² Utilitarianistic familism naturally forecloses extensive social involvement and political participation. The Chinese society on the whole is an inward-looking, atomistic society composed of a multitude of familial groups, each of which provides the locus for psychological identification and social interaction. The resourcefulness of these familial groups allows them to meet many of the mundane needs of the Hong Kong Chinese. This capacity of the Chinese society in turn makes the political arena relatively non-salient as a channel of need gratification and hence sustains the separation of polity and society. Therefore, "social accommodation of politics" is the basis whereupon the stability of the social-political system of Hong Kong depends.³

Being an atomistic and fragmented society, the social order of Hong Kong necessitates some kinds of integrative mechanisms to pull the diverse elements together to form a functioning whole. One of the most important integrative mechanisms found in Hong Kong is the law promulgated and enforced by the government. Given the minimal intervention which the bureaucracy practises, the spheres of activities under the coverage of the law are relatively few. Even in the few spheres covered, the law suffers from vagueness in goals and incomprehensiveness in scope which detract from its regulatory effectiveness. For most of the Hong Kong Chinese, conversely, the spirit of the law and the functions of the legal institution are incomprehensible, and its impact on their day-to-day behaviour is circumscribed. Accordingly, integrative mechanisms are definitely required to complement the essential role of law in the maintenance of social order.

Two are of cardinal moment. One of them - social custom - is enforced by the social control mechanisms developed within the Chinese society. In order for social custom to play its integrative role, three requisites must be available. First, the law as propounded by the government must not contravene it. Otherwise, its authority will be undercut. So far this condition seems to have been met, except that conflicts between legal and social norms do periodically erupt and strain the relationship between government and society. Second, the organizational fabric of the Chinese society, particularly the family system, must be viable if it is to be able to regulate individual behaviour by dispensing sanctions. For this reason the authority structure of the Chinese society must enjoy a certain level of stability. Lastly, ambiguities and conflicts in the normative order must be minimal. Otherwise social order will be threatened, and society itself will turn out to be the harbinger of political conflict. Until recently, it can be said fairly that the last two conditions are basically met in Hong Kong.

Aside from law and social custom, the market mechanism is a major integrative device in post-1945 Hong Kong. It should be emphasized that the integrative role of the market mechanism is by no means solely confined to the economy. In view of the pervasiveness of materialistic values and utilitarianism among the Hong Kong Chinese, the market principle is also of tremendous significance in regulating social relationships. To a government which is colonial in constitution and can command only limited moral authority and political trust, it is

more advantageous to appeal to a political market criteria to justify many of its actions, and to deliberately or inadvertently endow them with moral authority. The supremacy of market rationality in the social structure is reflected, for instance, in the popular perception of class relationships. The existing income inequality in Hong Kong is commonly explained and accordingly rationalized as a product of the market economy and hence "natural". The number of social classes in Hong Kong as perceived by the Hong Kong Chinese varies widely, signifying the absence of a conception of class relationship defined as antagonistic. Instead, wealthy persons are usually treated with an ambiguous mixture of envy and jealousy.⁴ Conceiving class structure primarily in market terms of course does not confer that degree of moral legitimacy which will make it sacrosanct. Still, it is quite sufficient to imbue it with a quantum of acceptability.

Acceptance of the stratification system on this ground is nevertheless conditional upon two circumstances. First, there must be a lot of opportunities for upward mobility, or at least they must be widely perceived as abundant, since most people then will be led to believe that they or their offspring eventually will be able to take advance. Second, the wealthy and the poor must not be perceived as embroiled in a zero-sum game. In the post-war period, economic prosperity has helped achieve the first condition, while the export-dependent economy fosters the notion that the wealth of the rich is accumulated from abroad through diligence and luck, thus camouflaging the "exploitative" nature of the relationship between the haves and have-nots. Undoubtedly, to undermine

the legitimacy of the market principle is to open the way to social conflict. More specifically, unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of the distributive or redistributive outcomes of market mechanisms will beget class animosities. In addition, any attempt to partially displace the market principle as the guiding light for resource allocation, public resources in particular, will very likely bring into the forefront political criteria and all their politicizing reverberations.

In the context of a limited government, a resourceful Chinese society, a general acceptance of social customs, the rule of law and the legitimacy of the market principle, politics in Hong Kong tends to take on a subdued and undramatic style. Several conspicuous features can be detected on the political scene:

(1) A low level of politicization, in that many social and economic issues are commonly regarded as falling outside of the political arena, and hence political solutions are not considered as necessary.

(2) The relationships between the bureaucracy and Chinese society assume an informal character. As the amount of interaction between them is small, most of the issues that trigger off the interactive process can be dealt with in an ad hoc manner. The necessity to set precedents, lay down general principles, and set up a complicated set of formal institutions to govern their relationships is less compelling. This accords well with the inclination of both parties to "avoid" each other. Because of this avoidance the thin layer of mediating structures lying between them - consisting of official devices and community organizations⁵ - is not overly burdened.

(3) On account of the atomistic nature of Chinese society, demands articulated by the Chinese populace and directed to the government are mostly fragmented in structure. Rarely do they coalesce into large-scale, general demands. The government normally is exempted from being forced into a situation where it is confronted by demands so colossal and broad-scoped that its ability to meet them is severely tested. Fragmented demands can be easily dealt with in an ad hoc fashion, while their infrequent occurrence affords the government sufficient time to arrive at considered decisions.

(4) Pragmatism in general informs political behaviour. Ideologies, especially those with an idealistic and apocalyptic flavour, are popularly greeted with disdain. Pragmatism is in harmony with the ethos of administrative rationality and utilitarianistic familism, found respectively in the bureaucracy and in Chinese society. Political issues in Hong Kong, if they do arise, have mostly to do with concrete concerns whose solutions are amenable to measurement in material terms. Pragmatism as shared by both the government and the governed provides a solid basis for making bargains, compromises and concessions, and hence for prompt settling of the conflicts.

Utilizing the previous observations as a backdrop, we can then proceed to assess the effects of recent changes on the parameters of the minimally-integrated social-political system and their political impact. As some of these effects are still inchoate, they can only be described in a preliminary manner. Exaggerations here and there have unfortunately to be made in order to sharpen the focus, and a controlled speculative element is an integral part of this analytical

exercise.

Changes in the Parameters of the
Social-Political System

The most significant changes in the last one and a half decades include a more service-oriented government and a more individualistic and fragmented society. Related to these changes are an increase in the salience of law as compared to social custom as an integrative mechanism, and a growing skepticism toward market rationality as the guiding principle in resource allocation and distribution. All these changes converge to bring into the limelight the government and the judicial function. Concomitantly the prominence of social organization, social control and social custom recedes. The political implications of these changes are not difficult to sort out, and they will be outlined in the next section.

In the wake of the Leftist-inspired riot of 1967 the government has expanded its interventionist role in Chinese society by enlarging its service-delivery functions and assuming part of the responsibilities for the definition and solution of social problems.⁶ This entry into the social realm on the part of the bureaucracy, however, is not guided by any long-term, integrated and detailed plans. Aside from stipulating some goals in measurable physical or monetary terms, the government does not seem to have anticipated the trajectory of social change consequent upon both natural development and public policies, the type of public-private relationships that will ensue and the "ideal" Chinese society that should be targeted for and then used as the

criteria for the selection of policy instruments. In line with the bureaucratic ethos, its social, cultural and service roles are performed in an ad hoc, disjointed, and somewhat amorphous manner. Not infrequently the government is drawn prematurely into playing these social-cultural roles in particular areas without any serious forethought (as in the controversial issue of homosexuality). Policy incoherence and random shifts in policy emphasis (for instance, in the land, rent control, educational and transportation areas) produced by recognition of policy conflicts or failures are not rare phenomena.

The seriousness of this perennial problem, while obviously a reflection of a rigid and top-heavy decision-making structure, is further accentuated by several factors. First and foremost is the inexperience of a government which is still addicted to the principles of laissez-faire and non-interventionism. This in turn leads to a state of policy immobilism. The performance of the social and service roles is impaired considerably by a resistance to change, especially among officials in lower echelons. Conservatism, anti-intellectualism, empiricism and preference for incrementalism still prevail in the government. Second, modern social problems easily defy precise identification and definition, not to say solution. In a political system where popular participation is low, bureaucratic definition of social problems is frequently based on narrow concepts stripped of broad political and societal meanings, and solutions for them are conceived in administrative terms. Though the government has so far assiduously contrived a battery of ways to improve its problem-solving

capability, the stranglehold of its own conceptual blinders has proven to be paralyzing. Lastly, the intertwining nature of modern social problems runs counter to the conventional departmental boundaries inside the government, and their solution necessitates more flexible deployment of resources and more innovative organizational arrangements. Under the existing bureaucratic set-up, policy response to social issues is characteristically slow and ineffective. Admittedly the Hong Kong government is not unique in finding itself in an administrative morass from which it is difficult to escape. However, given the exclusiveness of the political sector and the dominant role of the civil service, the bureaucracy will naturally and inevitably be the sole recipient of blame or praise whenever the polity is popularly held responsible for the solution of social problems. In Hong Kong, the bureaucracy is almost the only potent organized force in society that is in a position to take initiatives. It is inescapable that whenever social problems proliferate, it has to be the group that is expected to do something.

While the government widens its responsibilities, its capability is inopportunately diminished by an erosion of its political authority and a decline in its organizational solidarity. The first issue will be touched upon later. The second issue stems from the professionalization of the civil service, the murkiness of its service role and the strains produced in officials on the job, especially among the so-called "street-level bureaucrats".⁷

The enlargement of the service and welfare responsibilities of the government entails organizational changes in the bureaucracy. They have

brought about a more professionalized, differentiated and complex administrative apparatus. Accompanying these changes is the need to centralize decision-making and standardize operational procedures so as to coordinate the diverse activities of the specialized functionaries. These organizational imperatives will before long come into conflict with the professional ethics and goal orientations espoused by professional workers. Such ethics and orientations have been established independently of the government and their rationalizations find support in the international context. Centralization and standardization would necessarily subject them to a series of constraints which might be perceived as debilitating and redundant. That the morale of the professionals and paraprofessionals will be adversely affected is not surprising at all. The inclusion of these professional and paraprofessional groups in a uniform salary structure will unavoidably set into motion invidious comparisons, create the political pressure to revise or scrap the existing structure, promote efforts at unionization and instigate union militancy. The process of professionalization will also be intensified as those groups whose professional status is at most marginal will seek professional recognition and monopolization of recruitment in order not to lag behind in this scramble for spoils. In view of the virtual impossibility of setting up universally acceptable criteria to differentiate between the money-worthiness of the professional groups and in light of their superb organizing and bargaining skills, unionization and industrial actions by civil servants will tend to increase. This outcome will definitely be detrimental to bureaucratic unity. Recently, inflation and economic recession have

added fuel to this competitive game, propelling the civil servants to struggle to preserve, or occasionally even to increase, their standard of living in a slowed-down economy.

On the part of the government, so far it has reserved to itself the embarrassing but arduous task of arbitrating among its own employees by treating the issue as an internal "family" affair. The general public is excluded from the controversy, nor is its rapport mobilized to impose disciplinary controls over the recalcitrant civil servants. This reluctance to involve the people in internal governmental business is of course based on the government's unwillingness to voluntarily cede political power to them in return for their support, unless in the future the situation becomes so unmanageable (for example, in times of financial stringency) that it is absolutely necessary. The inclusion of the general public will also have the unwanted effect of diminishing the prestige and authority of the government, which will be seen as incapable of putting its own house in order. This scenario the government naturally wants to prevent.

The solution the government has contrived is to grant salary concessions to its employees. This irrefutably is a short-sighted solution, and its long-term economic and political implications are disturbing. Firstly, the appetites of civil servants will be whetted, causing more troublesome problems to come. Secondly, the future expenditure of the government will increase ineluctably, which means that its "extractive" capacity in society will correspondingly have to be enhanced, pitting it against society. The emergence of civil servants

as a distinct interest group perceived as milking society for its own sake will severely tarnish the benevolent image which the government has strenuously tried to cultivate for itself in past decades. The conflict between "public" and private interests comes at a most inopportune time when more popular trust in the government is desperately needed to implement government policies. In times of economic difficulties, this conflict will be exacerbated and the political toll will be considerable.

Political alienation springing from the increasing separation of bureaucratic and societal interests is aggravated by unsatisfactory bureaucrat-client encounters. The shift in emphasis from delivery of physical goods (roads, parks, etc.) to provision of service goods involves government officials in face-to-face interaction with their clients. In such encounters, proficiency in handling human feelings with utmost delicacy and empathic understanding is indispensable. Nevertheless, this skill is wanting, especially among the street-level bureaucrats, such as nurses, policemen, urban service workers, social workers, and teachers, whose contacts with the common people are frequent and who provide them first-hand impressions of the government. The deficiency in interpersonal skills on the part of street-level bureaucrats can be explained by their inexperience in an area which has only recently appeared and which requires a job orientation contrary to the bureaucratic ethos nurtured in a colonial context. But this is not all. The murkiness of the content in the roles of server and served leaves undefined the proper patterns of interaction between them. Moreover, embedded in the high expectations which the general public hold for these service workers is

an unrealizable, idealist expectation that could easily foster disappointment. The role anxieties suffered by street-level bureaucrats and their discriminatory behaviour toward those whom they define as the "undeserving poor" go even further to afflict an already soured relationship.

The bureaucracy is not alone in finding itself in distress. Chinese society is also in the throes of a secular process of disorganization, which leaves it increasingly unable to deal with its outstanding problems, cater to its basic needs and exercising effective social control over its people. The paradoxical fact is that at the time the Chinese society is progressively alienated from the government, its dependence upon the government in terms of need-fulfilment and order-maintenance increases. A vicious circle is thus brought into being: a disorganized Chinese society creates the need to expand government services, which in turn act as a catalyst to further societal disorganization, political alienation, erosion of political authority, and eventually the need for more governmental intervention.

At the most general level, the causes of Chinese societal disorganization can be sought in the fast pace of industrialization, commercial growth, rise in living standards, urbanization and Westernization which Hong Kong has experienced since the Second World War. The disruptive effects of these breathtaking changes cannot be safely dissipated or contained by a social fabric whose resilience is lessened. In comparison with many other countries, the legitimacy of the Chinese order in Hong Kong is not derived from authoritative traditional institutions such as religion, a priesthood, hierarchical structure, an educational system or

a coercive state. The recency of the disintegrative changes, on the other hand, does not afford the Chinese society sufficient time to develop the modern social control mechanisms which can be depended upon to ease the situation, such as modern voluntary organizations, political groups, community groups, economic enterprises, interest associations and modern religious groups. Consequently, the decline of the traditional organizations, whose integrative function was weak even in their heyday, gradually but steadily leaves a void in the social control sector of the Chinese society.

From the very beginning, Chinese society has been suffused with a utilitarian and pragmatic ethos, which degrades the value of moral standards and expressive symbols. In effect, the transition from utilitarianistic familism to an individualism infused with self-seekingness will encounter no obstacles. In fact, increasing social interaction, interdependence and organizational complexity befitting a modern industrialized society have effectively torn down the social barriers instilled by small familial groups. Economic prosperity has reduced the mutual dependence of familial members. The expansion of opportunities for social and geographical mobility and the resultant diversification of interests and outlooks within the familial groups also contributes to their disintegration. Chinese society has so far relied heavily on fragmentation and social barriers to curb social communication and thus to exert social control over individuals. Structural changes operate to release individuals from the grip of these groups, and the expansion of modern mass media opens up opportunities for social communication.

Individuals become more and more rootless and are more vulnerable to manipulation and persuasion by forces beyond their understanding and control.

Individual freedom of choice has increased tremendously. With the crumbling of earlier conventions, relationships are now undertaken and dropped more easily, thus resulting in a more volatile and fluid society. Traditional social customs are severely threatened by modern values and iconoclastic currents. Cultural adrift tends to undermine the time-honoured normative order without offering an alternative. Social and psychological problems abound, such as the problems of the aged, mental illness and juvenile delinquency. Many people who would formerly be able to find refuge in familial groups are now deserted and become the liability of the government. More typically, many of the young people have become victims of their new-found freedom and economic prosperity. They constitute a freewheeling force with an explosive potential. For many their energies are spent in negative and fruitless endeavours.

The current situation is further complicated by the unprecedented economic boom of Hong Kong in the past decades. Economic growth tends to fuel rising expectations. Once people know that things can change, they will not accept easily any more the basic features of their condition that were once taken for granted. Egotistic individualism, which gradually replaces utilitarianistic familism, expresses itself aggressively in materialist, acquisitive struggles and rejection of the residual traditional restraints on private strivings.

In face of the inexorable process of privatization in Chinese society,

the integrative function of social custom is inadequate. Social custom in Hong Kong has so far been effective as an integrative device primarily in a small, intimate group settings. More precisely, as the embodiment of private morality, it is more pertinent to the regulation of behaviour in familial groups where people share common interests. This social custom emphasizes largely narrow familial interests and endorses an "exploitative" orientation toward society. It is inadequate as a means for exercising social control in a large societal setting where interpersonal relationships partake of a more segmental, formal and transient nature. With the diminution of the integrative role of social custom, the role of market forces and the law acquires additional importance.

However, the market principle also finds itself in trouble. Several causes can be attributed to the growing skepticism toward market rationality. First, the imperfections in the supposedly free, competitive market are increasingly obvious. The expansion of monopolistic power in the economy bespeaks of market breakdown. The beneficial effects which are supposed to accrue to society by the free operation of the market are no longer assured. Second, the growing income inequality, fueled by inflation and personified by the upstart land developers who are perceived to exploit the underdogs, renders the market principle all the more unacceptable as a distributive mechanism. The emergence of a small bunch of billionaires, the visibly self-indulgent, conspicuous consumption by the rich, and their perceived evasion of the moral obligations imposed on them by social norms, seem to have raised class consciousness among the common people to a more palpable level. The emergent

notion of a zero-sum game between the haves and have-nots certainly is harmful to social harmony. Third, the increasing bureaucratization of the economy has limited the chances of upward mobility for many and made the prospect of running one's own business more gloomy. This also fosters disenchantment with the market. Lastly, social problems and individual needs tend to proliferate with the development of a capitalist economy, and they will not be adequately dealt with by a private economic sector immersed in the sacredness of market rationality. While formerly traditional organizations and familial groups played a prominent role in handling them, the decline of these organizations and the sheer magnitude of the problems compel the government to do something constructive. Political criteria for resource allocation will more and more be demanded by the public, and the government will be summoned to tame rapacious market forces.

The law becomes the last resort to impose a semblance of order on a disintegrating society. The rising litigiousness of the Hong Kong Chinese, the overloaded docket, and the voluminous law-making and law-enforcement activities of the government in recent years all attest to the enhanced integrative function of law in Hong Kong today. While the capacity of law to maintain order might be considerable, because it is backed up by the coercive power at the disposal of the government, it alone is far from adequate to integrate a modern society. Firstly, as it is perceived as being made by a colonial government and necessarily reflecting the will of the bureaucracy, it is obeyed expediently because of the punishments tagged to its violation. Secondly, in view

of its basically regulative character, its educational effects are far from illustrious as to bring the social order to rest on a more legitimate and secure basis. Thirdly, the law is not formulated in a programmatic manner in accordance with positive and far-sighted social and cultural policies. It is expediently made and remade, and its cumulative effects on social reorganization are minimal. Fourthly, the weakening of the normative and social order in Chinese society will make the law appear as an exterior, impersonal force devoid of affectional and personal considerations, and it will be found intolerable. It will not facilitate the formation of intimate groups in society. Lastly, the widening assumption of the law enforcement function by the government, with all its regulative inhibitions, will unavoidably alienate the people politically and make it more difficult to obtain their political trust. Equally alienating is the costliness of litigation, which makes the law appear to favour the rich and discriminate against the poor. As a result, the growing reliance on law can only be a partial remedy for the ills in society, but its overuse or abuse will certainly produce undesirable consequences.

The New Politics in Hong Kong

In the context of an expanded bureaucracy with a growing service emphasis, a weakened Chinese society, an increase in acquisitive individualism, suspicion toward market rationality and progressive prominence of legal regulations, the political style in Hong Kong will have to differ from that in the recent past. While the new politics

do not portend any impending political crisis, it does signify a modified style of political behaviour with implications for the long-term relationship between the bureaucracy and the Chinese society.

In comparison to the political style which has prevailed in post-war Hong Kong, the new politics entails an increase in the level of politicization, gradual formalization of the relationship between the bureaucracy and the Chinese society, progressive aggregation of political demands and growing salience of ideology in citizen political actions.

(1) Chinese society, being more individualistic and fragmented than before, is becoming incapable of attending to the needs of the Chinese populace. The worsened situation of income distribution in the Chinese society, and the diminishing potency of social customs, have driven more and more people to turn to the government for assistance. On top of these individual needs are the general needs inherent in a complex, industrialized and urban society. In the forefront are the needs for transportation, housing, education, public security and social and urban facilities. More recently, the need for governmental intervention in the operation of the economy has sharpened, though its urgency is not yet popularly recognized.

To simplify the matter, two types of needs can be identified, and in some ways they are interrelated. Some are general or global needs which affect the people universally, though in varying degrees. While the nature and composition of these general needs will change with time, on the whole they are relatively stable and hence are the recurrent items in the public agenda. With rising popular expectations of the

quality of public services, responding to these needs will become more and more costly to the government. Short of other changes, the long-term trend is that the government can hardly expect much voluntary support from the private sector. The existence of these common needs will require long-term and comprehensive policies, which should take into account the interrelationships of these needs and policy compatibilities in various spheres.

The growing salience and urgency of general needs is troublesome enough, but they are only part of the story. The other type of needs includes specific, time-bound, concrete needs, which are felt by only a small number of people. The challenge these needs pose to the public administrators is almost insurmountable, and this explains their disturbing effects on politics. Firstly, in catering to these needs, the service relationship between the bureaucrats and their clients is personal and is conducive to strains between them. The political implications, as said before, are mostly negative. Secondly, many of these specific needs involve the provision and distribution of urban services. Citizen demands are deeply fragmented because of the nature of urban public services. Because urban services are personalized and locality specific, they are highly divisible, both in terms of delivery and citizen demands. The implications of this are first that the government will be constantly bombarded by a large number of sporadic and unpredictable demands. Second, because of the concreteness of these demands, their satisfaction or non-satisfaction can be easily identified by the demand-makers. Any delay in accedence to these demands will be

immediately recognized and lead to frustration and alienation. The third characteristic of these specific demands is their variability. "There is enormous variation in individual needs and demands for city services. Service demands may vary from individual to individual on a block, from block to block, and from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. They also vary according to the race, economic position, age, sex, and family composition of urban residents."⁸ Such variations in needs bring about a deeply fragmented structure of citizen demands. And accedence to these fragmented demands necessitates in turn administration of specific treatments and solutions tailored to the idiosyncracies of the needs concerned. But this would require a level of flexibility in public administration which runs counter to the imperatives of a standardized and centralized bureaucracy.

With the accumulation of both general and specific needs and their entry into the political arena for solutions, the level of politicization in Hong Kong and the salience of the government as a problem-solver are correspondingly increased. While it is true that the Hong Kong Chinese still remain politically apathetic in attitude and behaviour, they however are quite informed about the activities of the government. In view of the primacy of their individual and familial interests, once they come to recognize the connection between these interests and the impact of the government on them, they will be quite prepared to expect government assistance, and they would become active in trying to obtain that assistance. In this way, they will be gradually inducted into the political process, though their awareness of general issues might remain minimal.

Politicization of society has a momentum of its own. Rising aspirations are one of the main causes. Governmental programmes that provide services for the people may themselves be the source of expectations of governmental aid in time of need. If citizens receive services, they may learn to expect more. Moreover, the weakening of Chinese society will continue unabated, and the problems thus generated will be a stimulant to further politicization.

(2) The informal, ad hoc character of the relationship between the bureaucracy and Chinese society is increasingly felt to be deficient. The growing significance of law as an integrative mechanism and the fact that the bureaucracy is the only law-maker in society will certainly raise the level of formalization in the relationship. Demands for more formal institutions and procedures to facilitate and regularize interactions between the government and the people are frequently made. The issue is all the more pressing in view of the large number of unmet needs and the gross inadequacy of existing intermediary mechanisms. On the part of the government, in face of a diversity of demand-making groups and individuals, some sorts of formal arrangements which enable it to deal with these people on a regular, stable basis is also desirable. Firstly, formalization conforms to the bureaucratic tendency to standardize and routinize matters. Secondly, formalization to some extent serves to depoliticize society by directing political demands into administrative and "legitimate" channels. The institution of local administrative reform in Hong Kong since 1981 is a case in point.⁹ So is the establishment of formal bodies geared to particular areas of concern. The long-term tendency to give consultative and advisory bodies

some executive and supervisory power will be another attempt at formalization.

The political implication of formalization will naturally be an increase in popular participation in government, even though such participation is also formally circumscribed. Along with popular participation will emerge a variety of citizen groups with explicit political motives. The aggregate effects of formalization have seemingly not been adequately understood by the government, nor for that matter the public. Nonetheless, the process is carried on in an incremental and piecemeal manner.

(3) The growing prominence of general needs stemming from a complex, interdependent society facilitates the rise of aggregate, general demands. Presumably, a majority of citizens share in these needs and they will benefit equally from their solution. In pursuing these demands, no conflict of interests among citizens is held to exist, though it normally aims at curtailing the power of some privileged groups such as the bus companies. This explains their general acceptability and the recent increase in general demand-making efforts. Two of the typical incidents are the popular campaign to oppose the increase in bus fares and the movement to involve the citizens in the supervision of the power companies. In these campaigns, the intermediary role of the mass media is quite critical, and this is symptomatic of its magnified significance in a situation where other mediating devices are inadequate.

While by nature the large number of specific, concrete demands

are not readily amenable to aggregation, some of them might share enough similarities as to call for some kinds of general policy revision by the government. For example, complaints of inadequate transportation facilities will sooner or later necessitate a comprehensive review of the transportation policy. If sufficient common elements are shared by these specific demands, they will team up with general needs to present to the government collective, broad-scoped demands whose non-satisfaction will spell political difficulties. In addition, these general problems will apply enormous pressure on the capacity of the government and create a more negative judgment as to the governability of the colony. More ominously, it will introduce the haunting spector of a fiscal crisis propelled by an insolvent government.

While the general problems have tremendous impact on future government-society relationship, the multiplicity of specific problems complicates the situation considerably. In essence, the urgency, immediateness and palpability of these specific problems tend to propel the people affected to actions that would redress them. The steady increase in small-scale, sporadic, and transitory collective actions with small concrete goals in recent years attests to the prevalence of these problems. Their confrontational and sensational quality compels the government to take immediate action to quell disorder if the image of the government is not to be seriously tarnished. The government, however, is hard-pressed to find speedy solutions to these problems. With the time element so overwhelming,

the government is frequently trapped in a situation where hasty actions have to be taken at the expense of long-term considerations. Moreover, much public resources are dissipated in a desultory, non-programmatic manner. For many of these problems, nevertheless, lack of response from the government is the normal result.

In the same fashion, the urgency of these specific problems which to a certain extent is created by the widespread influence of the mass media deprives the government of the time lag needed to respond to them in a more considered manner. Hasty and ill-advised responses might worsen the situation, whet appetites or spawn more troubles. Furthermore, it denies the government the time needed to make known to the people the long-term effects of particular policies, convince them of the need for short-term endurance of undesirable solutions, and disrupts the continuity and "rationality" of policy-making.

(4) The new politics of Hong Kong displays a higher ideological tone. Inasmuch as almost all the demands made by the people concern problems which have little to do with the fundamental distribution of power in the colony, this increase in ideologization is somewhat puzzling, but it is not difficult to explain. Several factors appear to be involved. First, the elusiveness of most of the social problems in their identification, methods and degree of solution is a cause of endless controversy and argumentation. The innate connection between social problems and the nature of society in which they are found will sooner or later push the debates on social problems into the realm of

societal analysis. Once in this realm, the relevance of ideology will become more prominent. Second, the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the intermediary mechanisms between the bureaucracy and the people result in an unsettling feeling of powerlessness. The articulation of ideological arguments will provide some form of rationalization to make sense of the turbulent world and to justify organized and aggressive actions against the government. Third, because of the large number of specific and general issues, ideologization is an effective means to draw the attention of the government and the mass media to particular issues. Thus, issue generalization, issue dramatization, linking up specific issues to public interests, and liberal application of categorical and stereotypical terms are all designed to upgrade the global relevance of narrow demands. The colonial constitution of the government and the staggering income inequality in Hong Kong furnish ready and useful fuel to the ideologues.

An increase in the ideological level of the new politics in Hong Kong carries with it both advantages and disadvantages. The educational effects of ideology cannot be discounted, nor can their mobilizing impact. But their negative effects on the operation of the social-political system are equally evident. Firstly, the pragmatic orientation which has so far guided political behaviour in Hong Kong will be gradually worn away, resulting in a more volatile and combatant society. Secondly, ideologies of various brands tend to polarize society, particularly along the government/governed and haves/have-nots axes. Conflicts in the new context will take on more collective

dimensions. Thirdly, in view of the all-encompassing and self-righteous nature of ideological arguments, diverse demands will be aggregated in predetermined ways and are thus difficult to satisfy in toto. Their idealistic predispositions also are incompatible with the nature of pragmatic politics which emphasizes compromise, give-and-take, partial solutions and issue compartmentalization. The implacable nature of ideological demands makes them hard to satisfy, and therein lies the germ for further ideologization, which in turn feeds back on the process of politicization.

Discussion

Because of selective exaggeration, the political future of Hong Kong portrayed in the paper may look somewhat bleak. However, pessimism is out of place here. For behind the challenge which both the government and the people have to face lie some optimistic possibilities. Though I have no intention here to put forth any concrete policy proposals, I would like to take a preliminary inventory of the resources at the disposal of the social-political system and to suggest some directions for action which may put Hong Kong back on a more orderly track.

In the first place, the social-political system of Hong Kong is not yet on the verge of breakdown. The government is still unquestionably in firm control of political power and its political dominance is not yet seriously challenged. Chinese society, while considerably weakened, is still viable enough to contain many problems and issues and to prevent the government from being disastrously overloaded. The salient issues

that afflict Hong Kong are basically non-ideological in nature and their resolution does not require drastic restructuring of the social-political system. The people in Hong Kong can still expect to enjoy a rising standard of living. These are the strong points in Hong Kong which constitute the basis for addressing its contemporary problems in a reformist rather than a revolutionary direction. Inaction, on the contrary, is the most dangerous strategy.

Being the only organized force with political power in an atomistic society, the responsibilities for finding solutions to the nagging issues will have to fall squarely on the government. The social and cultural implications of its policies, not to say the political ones, have to be carefully assessed, and the overall impact of its diverse policies, normally formulated in isolation from one another, has to be accurately evaluated beforehand. What this boils down to are several possible policy guidelines. First, a more positive social and cultural policy has to be devised. This will require some careful thinking about the type of society which we would want to have and which would be possible given the available policy instruments. The laissez-faire approach, which has increasingly drawn its own critics all around the world, should definitely not be allowed to govern the social, cultural and moral realms. Social and moral non-interventionism, under existing circumstances, would only lead to social and moral anarchism and further weaken a beleaguered Chinese society.

Second, the government should develop the habit of thinking systemically and far-sightedly. The structure of the social-political

system, the direction toward which it will be changing, the prerequisites for social and political stability and progress, the opportunities for actions of various kinds, the limitations or inadequacies of both government and society, all have to be fully analyzed and the findings therefrom diffused not only inside the government but also throughout society. Only through a mutual awareness of each other's resources and constraints will a more pragmatic problem-solving style be developed and the rules of the game appropriate to the new political situation be set up. Mutual misunderstanding and overestimation of each other's capabilities will only promote unrealistic demands upon each other, accentuating the ideological tone and pushing the system into a state of chaos. Only a fuller appreciation of the limitations of the government and the responsibilities of the people will bring about a more tolerant attitude toward government failures. And here lies the significance of more popular participation in politics - to enable more people to share political power as well as the responsibilities with the government.

Third, as the government is gradually made aware of its inability to perform this Herculean task all by itself, it will find the support from society well-nigh indispensable. But to enlist support from society through political mobilization will require a level of trust and confidence in the government which does not now obtain in Hong Kong. The popular perception of the government as but another rapacious, self-serving actor - and one endowed with many self-made privileges - in the merciless economic game is certainly not conducive to elevating

its standing in the eyes of the people. The concessionary policy of the government toward its own employees at the expense of society will only further demarcate from private interests, forcing them into sharper opposition. Actions by the government which can visibly and dramatically make known its concern for the well-being of the common people are clearly necessary to restore political trust. An extensive search for alternative means of social reorganization has to be undertaken to strengthen the social fabric, which, if successful, can in turn function to lessen the government's workload. Though we recognize the limitations of public policies in shaping social organization, it does not however mean that nothing at all can ever be attempted. Political partnerships of one form or another between the government and various social groups can be established to deal more effectively with the multitude of social problems. Such partnerships might enlist contributions from both sides. The government might also want to encourage and reward those social or community groups which can come up with new ideas and mobilize societal resources by rendering them support of various kinds. In this way, those groups which ordinarily lack motivation and initiative might be stirred into action.

In view of the diversity of current problems and the speed required for their solution, conventional consultation techniques, being slow and clumsy, are defective. Faster and broader-based methods of information-gathering have to be devised. Moreover, new intermediary organizations which can aggregate and moderate demands have to be promoted to facilitate policy formation and cultivate public rapport.

To deal with the multiplication of both general and specific needs in society, a more drastic reorganization of the bureaucratic administration is clearly called for. The basic principle of reorganization is to aim at further centralization and decentralization of decision-making. This would require, for example, a detailed task analysis in the government and the specification of the optimal distribution of decision-making power for each task. Some tasks may necessitate more centralization of power, while the reverse might hold for the others. More general and coherent policies have to be designed to address to society-wide issues, while flexible resource and personnel deployment are clearly needed to allow the government to meet the sporadic, specific demands more speedily and effectively. The economic militancy of civil servants must be curtailed, possibly with the assistance of society. And street-level bureaucrats have to be educated to perform better in their service roles.

All in all, Hong Kong now is in the midst of a relearning process, involving both government and society. This process will hopefully result in the institutionalization of a revised set of game rules. This then will form the foundation for a new consensus between the government and the people. While the chance of success seems good, the outlook is unfortunately clouded by the uncertainty of Hong Kong's future political status (viz., the threat of its takeover by China in 1997) and the scenario of uninterrupted economic recession. Both of these factors are unfavourable to far-sighted thinking and a more receptive attitude toward short-term sacrifices.

NOTES

- ¹See Lau Siu-kai, "Utilitarianistic familism: the basis of political stability in Hong Kong," in Ambrose Y.C. King and Rance P.L. Lee (eds.), Social Life and Development in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1981), pp. 195-216; and Society and Politics in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, in press).
- ²Lau Siu-kai, "Chinese familism in an urban-industrial setting: the case of Hong Kong," Journal of Marriage and the Family, Vol. 43, No. 4 (November 1981), pp. 181-96.
- ³Lau Siu-kai and Ho Kam-fai, "Social accommodation of politics: the case of the young Hong Kong workers," Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics (in press).
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Lau Siu-kai, "The government, intermediate organizations and grass-roots politics in Hong Kong," Asian Survey, Vol. 21, No. 8 (August 1981), pp. 865-84.
- ⁶Joseph Y.S. Cheng, "Goals of government expenditure in a laissez-faire political economy: Hong Kong in the 1970s," Asian Survey, Vol. 19, No. 7 (July 1979), pp. 695-706.
- ⁷Michael Lipsky, "Toward a theory of street-level bureaucracy," in Willis D. Hawley and Michael Lipsky (eds.), Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), pp. 196-213.

⁸Douglas Yates, The Ungovernable City: The Politics of Urban Problems and Policy Making (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1978), p. 22.

⁹Lau Siu-kai, "Local administrative reform in Hong Kong: promises and limitations," Asian Survey (in press).