

HONG KONG: Landslide outcome in district elections cannot break stalemate

Pro-democracy candidates scored a landslide victory in Hong Kong district council elections held on 24 November, a sign that the public remains largely supportive of the protest movement, despite its increasing violence and radicalism.

Voter turnout surged to 71% of eligible voters, far ahead of the 47% turnout ratio in 2015, which was already elevated following the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Young voters were responsible for a large share of the new turnout. Pro-democracy candidates won 389 of 452 elected seats, the highest total ever and up from 124 seats in 2015. Pan-democrats now control 17 of the territory's 18 district councils, compared with none previously. Though pro-democracy candidates were expected to make some gains, the scale of their victory was a surprise.

The outcome does not meaningfully redistribute institutionalized political power in Hong Kong. District councils are low-level bodies that handle neighborhood issues such as the provision of certain public services and disbursement of public funds allocated to districts by the Hong Kong government. The councils also appoint about a tenth of the members comprising the 1,200-person election committee that chooses Hong Kong's chief executive, but the latest election will not be enough to tip the overall composition of that committee towards the pro-democracy camp.

The most significant outcome of the election is the evidence it offers about the public's enduring support for the protest movement, despite its drift towards radicalism and violence. Persistent public support for the movement increases the likelihood of what we have called the [Belfast Scenario](#), in which a radical core of violent protestors is able to survive for years due to the sympathy it enjoys from a broader swathe of the public. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam responded to the result by promising that her government would "listen to the opinions of members of the public humbly and seriously reflect".

On the mainland, politicians and state media have so far been largely silent. Some Communist Party leaders and pro-Beijing politicians in Hong Kong had been persuaded that a "silent majority" of Hong Kongers opposed the protest movement and longed for a return to normal life. Though the election result will force them to face reality, the outcome is unlikely to break the [political stalemate](#) in which the Hong Kong government and the Communist Party are unwilling to meet protestors' core demands.

Beijing therefore has little choice but to maintain its "[strategy of attrition](#)" against the movement, which includes seeking to address economic grievances – such as housing costs, education, and health care – that are at least partially responsible for public discontent. The party leadership will also maintain the pledge adopted at its recent [fourth plenum](#) to impose new legal and enforcement mechanisms in Hong Kong to protect "national security".

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