**Open minds**

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The race for the next Chief Executive of HKSAR has drawn much public attention lately. The two front runners are caricatured as a pig and a wolf, echoing a typical Hong Kong cynicism of “choosing the lesser evil” among the candidates.

At heart, the legitimacy of this election is questioned. Indeed, it is the frustration with the lack of a democratic voice in Hong Kong that makes people look to the future leader of government as necessary “evil” or unwanted interferences in their lives and businesses. Underlying this cynical mentality is a fundamental distrust as well as apathy of the Hong Kong people.

This prompts a long-standing question of whether democracy is attainable without a strong and mature civil society that is based on civic participation.

In the past decade or two, Hong Kong civil society has grown in size but not in impact. Take public engagement in charitable activities as an illustration. Both the number of charitable organizations recognized as qualifying for tax exemption and the private charitable donations as a percentage of gross domestic product have increased remarkably. The former increased from 3,250 in 2000 to over 7,000 in November this year while the latter increases from 0.19% of GDP in 2000 to 0.50% in 2010.

While Hong Kong people are more and more willing to donate to charities, few would bother to participate in activities or commit to a social cause in a sustained manner in addition to giving. Even fewer would set up a civil organization or launch platforms for policy debate. This is reflected in the lack of interest in labour unions; from 2000 to 2010 – a time when many workers faced serious issues concerning pay and conditions – the percentage who joined unions was virtually static, rising from 19.96% to 21.1%.

This impression is backed up by findings of the Civil Society Index, released by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in 2006, which concluded that civil society in Hong Kong is vibrant but loosely organized. While celebrating the vibrancy, we should be concerned about the second part of that conclusion. Civil society appears to be disjointed, and of course that makes its impact limited in many ways. This is hardly a natural or random occurrence. I believe it is, in fact, the result of deliberate government policy to minimize the capacity of civil society.

Take advisory or statutory bodies. In 2002, a year of improvement in this regard, 57% of these bodies’ meetings were closed to public participation; by 2010 the figure had risen to 67%. Appointment of members of these bodies is far from open or transparent. Of the 5,714 members appointed in 2010, less than half sat on just one body; 1,125 persons had accumulated nearly 3,200 memberships, and 110 people actually served on five or more bodies. Also, members are appointed in their individual capacity, thus preventing deeper structural involvement of civil society organizations in the advisory process.

If the government hopes that limiting civic participation will help maintain political stability, it seems to be mistaken. Hong Kong Police Force figures show that the number of demonstrations has increased by more than 150% from 2,064 in 2000 to 5,656 in 2010.

In a democracy, the government builds its legitimacy on people’s votes in elections. In free but undemocratic Hong Kong, the government is not so foolish as to threaten people’s right to demonstrate. Yet it seems it is not smart enough to open up more channels for civic participation, which would surely help ease the rising public frustration. Opening up the meetings of the advisory and statutory bodies would be a basic step, and increasing the transparency of the appointment of members is also essential.

Rather than focusing on the exclusion of mainstream people from such bodies – or using appointments to them as a way of rewarding supporters – the government should be more daring. It should examine ways to let the boards go beyond their advisory role and be organized as effective platforms of civic dialogue and debate between the government and civil society. Open-minded officials should see this not as a threat to their power but as an investment to upgrade the capacity of civil society in an otherwise undemocratic structure.

We have a system where the leadership fears civil society as a threat to the government’s legitimacy and effectiveness. It is hardly surprising that people gauge potential new leaders as relative “evils”. Will the next chief executive change things?

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