

How the PFI Hong Kong Staff Are Experiencing the Current Situation

## Storm over Hong Kong

*In response to many customer requests, Dr. Gerhard Nickolaus, Head of PFI's Asia Activities, has written an article on the situation in Hong Kong. Read here how the PFI Hong Kong staff are experiencing the situation.*

### Extradition Bill Triggers Protests

Hong Kong has changed significantly over the last five months. A city that was once one of the safest metropolises in the world has now transformed into a battlefield. The riots and protests were sparked by the controversial bill of the Hong Kong government for an extradition law (an amendment to the Law on Fugitive Offenders and Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters). A law would have allowed the Hong Kong government to extradite suspect criminals from Hong Kong to mainland China, where they would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China.



*Since June, Hong Kong has experienced a massive protest movement (Photo: Pixabay / StockSnap)*

Outrage over the law led to an explosion of social dynamite accumulated over the past 20 years. The bill was declared dead by Hong Kong Prime Minister Carrie Lam on 9 July and officially withdrawn on 23 October.

Although the Extradition Bill may have triggered off the violent demonstrations, the real problem stems from the unbearable social conditions, which especially young people and anyone with middle or low income are subjected to.

### Horrendous Rents, High Cost of Living

In Hong Kong, the rent for a 40 m<sup>2</sup> apartment is between 15,000 and 22,000 Hong Kong dollars (HKD; approximately 1,700 to 2,500 euros). The minimum wage per hour is HKD 37.5, which results in a monthly salary of around 7,000 HKD. The average salary in Hong Kong is 15,000 to 20,000 HKD.

The discrepancy between the cost of living in the city and the income situation of



*population density (Photo: Pexels / Aleksandar Pasaric)*

many local residents became amplified following the handover of Hong Kong to Mainland China in 1997. Paradoxically, after being handed over to the Communist People's Republic of China, Hong Kong became the most capitalist place in the world. There is no legal rent limit. Landlords can increase the rent at will and turn tenants adrift at any time.

Tourists often only see Hong Kong's glittering harbour front; they shop in the luxury branded shops and stay in sumptuous hotels. But that's just one facet of Hong Kong. The north of Hong Kong is poor, the houses are old and in delapidated condition, the apartments tiny and the hygienic conditions poor. Here live the "normal" Hong Kongers and the grassroot workers, and conversely: the people who form the backbone of the city. They recognise with enormous frustration that the middle class in Mainland China enjoys a better standard of living than in Hong Kong; this is another reason why the protests are becoming increasingly violent. Hong Kong is facing a social revolution.



*Hong Kong, as shown in glossy travel brochures (Photo: Pexels / Nextvoyage)*

### **Protests Against Feared Restrictions of Freedom**

Hong Kong was a British crown colony until 1997. Since its handover to the PRC, the city has been politically a province of mainland China, but still enjoys special status until 2047 ("one country, two systems"). Until then, Hong Kong should retain its legal system, which guarantees the freedoms of Hong Kong Chinese. The people of Hong Kong are used to free speech, free press, free internet, free travelling and a well-developed Western-based administration and jurisdiction. They are afraid that these freedoms they are accustomed to will be restricted in the future.

Myriad borders exist between the two regions. To this day, Hong Kong people do not identify as Chinese, but as Hong Kongnese. The language in Hong is Cantonese, whereas in the PRC it is Putonghua (High Chinese).

The first demonstrations in response to the extradition bill began in June 2019. Initially respectful and exemplary, the protests were addressed to the Hong Kong government as a clear signal of discontent. More than one million people (in a city of over seven million!) expressed their disappointment. But the government appointed by Beijing ignored these demonstrations.

When the protests turned violent, the government began to crack down on the protesters. Meanwhile, weekly manifestations, police operations, violence and counter-violence continued to occur. The protests have turned into a wildfire which is unlikely to be easily stopped. As already mentioned, the spark that lit the flame, the extradition bill, is no longer a subject for the demonstrators. Now it is about preserving their rights and freedom, about reforms and social justice.

In early October, the Hong Kong government passed the so-called "Anti-Mask Law", a ban on face masks. The government invoked the city's Emergency Regulations Ordinance, which gives the chief executive sweeping powers if they consider Hong Kong to be in "an occasion of emergency or public danger".

Under the ordinance, the government could also potentially censor media, control public transport, search properties and make arrests under a state of emergency. Wearing face masks is quite common in Asia. It is a sign of thoughtfulness and courtesy if you catch a flu. The anti-mask law increased violence. Thousands of Hong Kongers took to the streets wearing masks. Hong Kong's Emergency Regulations Ordinance is an enabling law which gives the government a free hand and the demonstrators fear further restrictions on their freedom.

### **"We Will Have to Get Used to the Smell of Tear Gas"**

The young and international team at PFI Hong Kong have differentiated views on the current situation in Hong Kong, but everyone understands the plight of the young, angry demonstrators and their demands for fundamental reforms. We all relate and can empathise as Hong Kongers. We live in Hong Kong, we know the penned-up living conditions and the horrendous cost of living. We suffer with the city when we see the intensity of the protests and all the destruction and violence caused.



***The PFI-Hong-Kong Team (from left): Frank Liesenhoff, Jerry Zhang, Lulu Lam, Sarah Obser, Dr. Gerhard Nickolaus, Candice Wang, Nikki Chiang, Judy Hu, Karen Leung, Kelly Cooper.***

The demonstrations have only a limited influence on our daily work. Sometimes the main transportation system in Hong Kong, the MTR (Mass Transit Railway) stops service early or completely shuts down for the day. During larger protests, some roads and tunnels are blocked, meaning that you must check the situation before travelling to and from work. Especially when travelling to the airport, it is also well advised to check the traffic situation carefully so as not to miss a flight. After protesters occupied the airport, regulations were tightened, only permitting entry to people with valid tickets. Anyone picking up visitors or family members must wait outside the airport. Shopping malls

are frequently protest hotspots and continue to close early and on occasion close completely. This is all very far from the twenty-four-hour Hong Kong we know from the recent past.

Many conferences and other events have been cancelled. Some of our customers have cancelled their visit to Hong Kong due to the unsafe situation. The actual situation has even resulted in a drop in apartment rental prices and costly hotel prices have decreased.

Very few Mainland China tourists visit Hong Kong in the current climate, as Mainland Chinese are susceptible to verbal and, on occasion, physical attacks. It is common for protesters to burn the Chinese flag and to jeer and turn their backs when the Chinese anthem plays. The demonstrators have even created their own anthem for Hong Kong.



*There is no end to the protests in sight*  
(Photo: Pexels / Oscar Chan)

Experts have long predicted that China will interfere and use forceful measures to stop the demonstrations. This has not yet happened. The Governor of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, has been unfortunate in her reactions and she has so far been unsuccessful in calming the environment. It is very doubtful whether she is ever going to be capable of stopping the demonstrations.

### "Hong Kong Maintains its Unique Charm"

As of now, we cannot see a clear solution and there is no way out of the current situation. We are afraid that the violent demonstrations will continue for some time into the future. For now at least, we will have to get used to the smell and haze of tear gas over Hong Kong.

As we learn to accept the new situation., we feel that despite it all Hong Kong maintains its unique charm.

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