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Sunday October 12, 2014

Protests succeed even when they fail

By Jim Taylor

The “Umbrella Revolution” in Hong Kong appears to have failed.

Two weeks ago, up to 500,000 people – depending on who did the counting -- clogged Hong Kong’s downtown business district. When police responded with tear gas and pepper spray, protesters used umbrellas for protection.

But now the massed crowds have gone. Only a few diehard young people still occupy downtown streets.

Their goal? To have free, western-style elections for the island’s Chief Executive. The incumbent, Leung Chun-ying, “rules Hong Kong for the Chinese government,” said a 25-year-old protester.

For a while, the protests seemed to have achieved some success. The Hong Kong government agreed to meet with student leaders. Then it retracted its offer.

I’m hardly surprised. I can’t imagine Beijing giving Hong Kong much leeway to negotiate. The Communist system tends to roll over dissent the way a tsunami surges over a seawall.

Hong Kong residents should be used to it. They have staged annual protests every July 1 since 2003. Hundreds of thousands join the march. They have not yet budged Beijing’s ruthless grip.

More failures than successes

Failure seems to be the fate of such protest movements. I’ll concede some victories. Popular uprisings drove out the Communist governments in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. They brought down the Berlin wall.

And the civil rights movement in the United States managed to end legal discrimination against African Americans – although it clearly did not banish personal prejudices against black people.

But other movements have simply faded out. Or replaced one bad situation with a worse one.

Occupy Wall Street dissolved without dislodging the one per cent from their perch on top of the compost pile.

Three years ago, the much-lauded Arab Spring swept through 17 countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Economically and socially, Libya is probably worse off now than it was under Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Egypt deposed Hosni Mubarak, then replaced him with Mohammed Morsi, who was no better, who in turn was deposed by the Egyptian Army, Mubarak's original power base. Syrian protests against Bashar al Assad led to a vicious and apparently endless civil war, which destabilized the entire region, which enabled the formation of the Islamic State with its mass executions and video beheadings.

Not even the shootings at Kent State in 1970, where soldiers fired 67 rounds into a mass of students, killing four, convinced Richard Nixon to end the war in Southeast Asia. That took another five years, and it was a military rout, not a political one.

A step back to mob rule

Indeed, I could argue that these mass protests SHOULD fail. Although they wave the banner of democratic reform, their own process is anything but democratic. No one has cast a ballot for anything. No one has been elected, by any process.

And fairly obviously, you cannot organize national programs by waving thousands of cell phones in the night.

The attempt to change politics by mass protests is, in fact, closer to mob rule than to democracy. Half a million people don't legitimize a Wild West lynch mob.

But I won't belabour that argument. Because I think the protest movements are a sign of hope, even when they fail.

Voluntary servitude

Almost five centuries ago, a French student wrote an essay called *A Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. It's heavy reading, partly because author Etienne de La Boetie derives most of his illustrations from the literature of ancient Greece.

But his point is simple -- tyrants do not force the people to obey. Rather,

the people choose to submit.

Literary critic Steve Weissman summarized La Boetie's thesis, "Even absolute tyrants rely on the tacit acquiescence of their subjects.... Most people go along because they no longer know how to do anything different."

La Boetie's American translator, Harry Kurz, called the essay "one of the earliest demonstrations of a new ideal in government, the democratic, for the author clearly states that all people are born free and equal."

In the essay La Boetie admits, "We often have to obey force; we have to make concessions." But he goes on, the people's failure "to rise against a tyrant" results more from "indifference rather than cowardice."

"It is the inhabitants themselves who permit... their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude. A people enslaves itself... when, having a choice between being free and being vassals, it deserts its liberty... and gives consent to its own misery."

Protest movements, even if they fail to achieve their immediate goals, give the lie to La Boetie's pessimism. They demonstrate that at least some parts of the population reject what La Boetie called "voluntary servitude." They are not content to submit passively to the authorities who rule them.

"Resolve to serve no more," La Boetie assures the crowds in Hong Kong, in Tahrir Square, in Washington, "and you are at once freed."

The Umbrella Revolution may have faded away. The idealism behind it has not.

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YOUR TURN

I'm going to do something unusual here, by asking for your help on a local issue.

The Food Bank in Lake Country (population about 10,000) serves some 600 needy families every month. It pays no salaries, and operates with 50 volunteers out of two small rooms in the basement of a former elementary school that has just been put up for sale.

The community has raised about \$400,000 of the \$750,000 needed for a permanent new building, including land and materials. It has entered the Aviva Community Fund contest for a possible \$100,000 grant, from Aviva Insurance. Winning the grant depends on how many people vote for that project, on line.

Only the top 15 projects advance to the next round of voting. Over 400 proposed projects will be dropped.

Today is the last day for the first round of voting. For the last few days the Food Bank has fluctuated between 14th and 16th. Your vote could propel this project well up the list. If you're willing, please go to <http://www.avivacommunityfund.org/ideas/acf19456>, register, and cast your vote.

On behalf of the Food Bank, I thank you.

There wasn't much mail in response to last week's column, about the way that as groups grow larger, they have to change the way they administer themselves.

Isabel Gibson was the only person who picked up on that theme: "In the work world, I used to estimate that people could manage groups of about 50 -- and, by extension, activities requiring no more than 50. After that, it just got too complicated for human brains. Maybe, a la Diamond, that number is really nearer 100. But in any case, it's much smaller than many of our organizations. Breaking things down into manageable chunks is how some handle it -- the military among them.

"I'll be interested to see whether the internet eventually allows us to self-organize in small groups to get things done. That's the only hope I see of pushing back on the increasing size/specialization/demands of today's world."

Cliff Boldt is running for school trustee in the November B.C. elections. He wrote, "An excellent summary of the issues related to growth. I read, years ago, how for every \$1 raised from urban growth, the city was forced to spend \$1.04 to provide services. Peter Lester would understand that."

Likewise, Maxine DeHart is running for re-election as a city councillor here in Kelowna. She wrote, "An excellent column in today's paper."

Eduard Hiebert raised a number of issues about how politics works here in Canada. We're in continuing correspondence, too long and involved to include here, unfortunately.

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
