

## **Viktor Ungemach: On the Election of the Chief Executive in Hong Kong. Head of Government or Lieutenant of Beijing?**

The election of the Chief Executive held in Hong Kong on March 25, 2007 was the third to take place since the crown colony was returned to the People's Republic of China and transformed into a so-called special administrative region (SAR). Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, the former head of government, emerged victorious with 649 of 796 votes, whereas Alan Leong Kah-kit, his challenger from the pro-democratic camp, obtained only 123 votes. Although his programme hardly differed from that of his opponent, Mr Tsang was favoured from the start in the elections, which were accompanied by a public campaign for the first time. Their opinions differed only on the question of introducing universal suffrage, which was strongly advocated by Mr Leong.

Properly speaking, the basic law of Hong Kong provides for the election of the Chief Executive to take place in 2007 and that of the Legislative Council in 2008. However, the realisation of these two projects was later predicated on current developments within the SAR, leaving Beijing sufficient scope for influencing Hong Kong politics. When the People's Republic of China said that Hong Kong's population lacked experience in dealing with democracy, it prompted discontent among that population, causing a record number of 500,000 people in the SAR to take to the streets in 2004 and, moreover, initiating the formation of several political parties that demand democracy. However, as their only common denominator was the call for a swift realisation of universal suffrage, the clout of the pro-democratic camp remained weak.

Beijing defines its relations with the SAR of Hong Kong by the maxim 'One country, two systems'. Although it promised to respect Hong Kong's self-administration, it still asserts its own leading role in Hong Kong's foreign and military policy. The People's Republic of China also intends to respect the plan to preserve the market economy system until 2047, as laid down in Hong Kong's basic law. On the other hand, the vague provisions regarding the election of Hong Kong's head of government remain unchanged – to the benefit of Beijing.

The authority of the SAR's supreme head of government is considerable. He has the power to appoint the Executive Council and dissolve the Legislative Council. After the former British crown colony had officially been handed over to the People's Republic of China in July 1997, shipowner Tung Chee-hwa became the first man to hold the office of Chief Executive. Having resigned for health reasons, he was followed by Donald Tsang in 2005. Mr Tung's name is associated with numerous political misjudgements, increasing unpopularity among Hong Kong's population, the flawed management of the SARS crisis in 2003, and dwindling support by China's leadership.

During the recent election campaign, it quickly became apparent that there was hardly any difference between the positions of the two candidates, Mr Tsang and Mr Leong, on economic and social questions. However, unlike the ruling head of government, Mr Leong talked about the lack of democratic legitimation of the government, which had predominantly caused Hong Kong's socio-economic problems. His call for general elections in 2012 was confronted by critics who doubted that, in case of victory, Mr Leong would be suitable for the task as he had no experience in government. Mr Tsang, on the other hand, advertised himself as the current incumbent who had brought the policy of his predecessor, Mr Tung, to fruition. This policy really paid off for the SAR, especially as in June 2003, Beijing offered Hong Kong a Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which later proved advantageous for both sides.

To be sure, Mr Tung was not very popular among the people of Hong Kong, but the way in which his Beijing-friendly policy contributed towards the realisation of the CEPA was widely acknowledged. Not only did Mr Tsang benefit from Mr Tung's policy, he also had economic successes of his own to highlight in a press release. While he did point out, among other things, that the democratic awareness of those living in Hong Kong should be promoted further, he did not set a concrete date for introducing universal suffrage. This, in turn, caused his challenger to appeal to the public to take to the streets in the week of the elections to demand that competitive elections be held in 2012.

Without a doubt, the election campaign itself represents an encouraging sign as it showed that political disputes may now be addressed openly and transparently even in Hong Kong. Mr Tsang has still not named a date for introducing universal suffrage, but he did at least indicate his willingness to stop ignoring the wishes of Hong Kong's population and to search for a swift solution that is acceptable to both the SAR and the central government.

Not only the loser of the elections, Alan Leong, is fighting for the introduction of universal suffrage. Hong Kong's former Chief Secretary, Anson Chan Fang On-sang, who is well-known as the 'conscience of the city' because of her repeated and public criticism of Mr Tsang, also supports this concern, as does the Core Group for Democracy (CGD) founded by her.

But do the CGD and the pro-democratic camp still have a chance, or was their fight for the political rights of Hong Kong's population in vain? The latter is certainly not the case. Even though there are massive democratic deficits, and even though Beijing will certainly not tolerate any limitation of its options to influence political developments in Hong Kong, the people of Hong Kong vehemently defend their political and civil rights. And it is very unlikely that they will waste the opportunity to judge Donald Tsang by his promise to settle the question of general direct elections while still in office.

The leadership of the People's Republic of China still has a vital interest in controlling political developments in the SAR for its own purposes. However, it will have to proceed cautiously. The seed of democracy has been sown in Hong Kong, and nobody will be able to keep this seed from taking root.