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The Current: Will protests in Hong Kong continue?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to "The Current," part of the Brookings Podcast Network. Over the last several weeks, Hong Kong has seen ongoing demonstrations against an extradition bill that would allow people in Hong Kong to be sent for trial in mainland China, a strike against the "one country, two systems" framework adopted following Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule in 1997. On Monday, protesters stormed and briefly occupied the Legislative Council building in Hong Kong.

With us today is Richard Bush, a senior fellow with our Center for East Asia Policy Studies to talk about this. Richard, the controversial extradition bill itself has been suspended. So, can you talk about what is continuing to fuel these protests?

BUSH: The origin of the protests, I think, lies in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement, which was in the fall of 2014, which included the occupation of major areas of Hong Kong during that time. After that episode ended, it appeared that China was taking steps to undercut the political freedoms that the Hong Kong people were promised as part of a Hong Kong deal between China and the United Kingdom. It also appeared that China was moving to undermine the rule of law, which had also been promised. This caused growing concern in the Hong Kong public that some of the things that they had enjoyed were being taken away. It was bad enough they couldn't have elections. The idea that a Hong Kong resident could be turned over to China for trial in a legal system that is very different and much less than Hong Kong's rule of law was quite disturbing.

I think the public had been generally unhappy for some time and this gave them the opportunity to express their feelings about a whole lot of things, not just the extradition bill. I think that's one reason it's continuing. Another reason, I think, is that at least some people in the movement aren't really willing to take yes for an answer. They got what they wanted, the withdrawal of the bill, but now they're asking for more. They want a pledge that it'll never be brought up again, they want Chief Executive Carrie Lam to resign, they want the people who've been jailed or arrested to be set free. I don't know where it's going to

end up, but obviously there are still a number of people willing to come out on the streets to protest for those things.

PITA: In talking about the 2014 Umbrella Movement, an occupy movement, has China been responding in a similar fashion, or have they been any more or less aggressive in response to these current protests than they were to those?

BUSH: One strong similarity is that in 2014, China blamed a lot of the unrest on the United States and the United Kingdom, that we were the black hands behind all the unrest. It couldn't possibly be because of China's own policies that this was happening. Similarly, the propaganda apparatus in China is working overtime to make the same case: it's not their fault, it's the United States again stirring up trouble.

Second, China has been willing to let the Hong Kong government deal with the protests. They have a garrison of soldiers in Hong Kong, but they would much prefer for Hong Kong to be able to deal with it. Most of the demonstrations have been peaceful and there's a set of rules to guide how those demonstrations should take place. The violence that has occurred twice in the last couple of weeks has been the exception, not the rule. The police have done a pretty good job in dealing with it. Some violent response, but by and large, kept the situation under control. As a result, China hasn't had to intervene. If the situation had gotten much worse, then they might have had to reconsider that.

PITA: The Union Jack flag has showed up several times as a symbol during a lot of these protests. Well, obviously, the UK doesn't have any jurisdiction anymore in Hong Kong. Have there been any signs that they are taking a stronger interest in what's happening?

BUSH: I haven't seen any. This nostalgia for British colonial rule and the desire for Hong Kong independence, I think, reflects a certain degree of illusion on the part of a small group of people in Hong Kong who favor Hong Kong independence or would like to return to British rule. It's not going to happen -- the deed was done. Advocating these things only increases the paranoia of people in Beijing that China's interests are being challenged in a fundamental way.

PITA: Going forward, are there any signs about how the Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam will respond to these ongoing protests -- whether she's going to either change her approach or harden it? And also, looking at the protesters, whether there are any signs that they are going to be willing to stay in the streets for months -- the way that they did in 2014?

BUSH: It's very early to say. I imagine that Carrie Lam is hoping that the worst is over and that if she toes the line, that gradually, the demonstrations will dissipate, that people will begin to recognize that the demands that are on the table are excessive, and pretty soon, people will get back to their lives. Certainly by September, when school starts, that will reduce the appeal of going into the streets. I think Carrie Lam's political position has been seriously weakened. The story is that it was her idea to do this bill, not China's idea. The Hong Kong government really underestimated the opposition it would provoke. I

don't think she's going to be fired essentially anytime soon. She might decide to resign. But the way China handled a situation about 15 years ago, when there were another round of mass demonstrations, they didn't remove the then-Chief Executive right away. They waited about a year and then he resigned and was replaced by a subordinate. So, that may be what will happen in this case, that 6 months, a year from now, she will retire.

PITA: Anything else we should keep our eyes on going forward?

BUSH: First of all, I think one question is, will the element within the protest movement that is willing to engage in violence, almost inviting violence, whether they will continue to challenge the authorities. Some of those violent elements are in jail now -- will others come forward? Second, will this lead to the kind of occupation of public spaces that we saw in the occupy movement, where stretches of major thoroughfares were taken over and couldn't be used for other public purposes, like traffic. That hasn't happened so far. It happened before, it could happen again. That would prolong the situation and complicate it.