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The Politics of Social Policy Development in Hong Kong: Mobilization by Civil Society in a Semi-Democracy

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This paper studies the politics of social policy development in postcolonial Hong Kong, focusing on how societal mobilization has affected social policymaking in a liberal autocratic and semi-democratic setting. The significance of social mobilization in affecting social policy development has been receiving more scholarly attention. For instance, Kwon (2002, 2005) has adopted the concept of advocacy coalitions to study the politics of health care reform in Korea (Kwon, 2002) and comparative social policy reform in Korea and Taiwan (2005), paying particular attention to the collaboration between actors across the state and nonstate institutions. Hsiao's (2001) study of the social welfare movement in Taiwan has also shown how the structure of civil society and the linkages of important societal actors may have a direct impact on social policy development.

Joseph Wong's (2004) comparative study of health care reform in Taiwan and South Korea from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s represents by far the most systematic effort at elucidating the causal mechanisms between democratization and social policy development. Through his comparative studies, Wong generalizes some theoretical relationships between democratization and social policy change in Asian late democratizers. Among his major findings are that:

- 1) the logic of political competition compels newly democratic regimes to initiate some social policy reform as a way to secure continuous popular support.

- 2) institutionalized political competition prompts strategic political actors to turn socio-economic issues into salient bases of political contestation. Civil society actors will also take advantage of this ideological and issue space and push social policy reform agendas from the bottom up.

- 3) with democratization the state's social policy networks become increasingly open to outside political influence. It opens up new channels for the participation of previously marginal actors in the policy process, and brings about policy learning among officials as well as political learning among elected politicians.

- 4) cross-class coalition building is necessary for social welfare reform. These cross-class coalitions galvanized disparate groups around a single policy issue, fostered societal consensus on social policy reform, and framed the idea of social welfare reform in the language of democratic citizenship. They also formed effective linkages with reform minded politicians and legislators, turning their policy ideas into effective political influence. Their inclusion of policy experts enabled them to articulate sophisticated policy alternatives to counter the policy discourse produced by the state. (Wong 2004, ch.8)

Wong's (2004) theoretical findings provide extremely useful perspectives and reference points for us to study the impact of social mobilization in the semi-democratic setting. While for Hong Kong democratization is arrested and to date it remains a semi-democracy, civil liberties have been present since the late colonial period and remain well-protected after the handover of sovereignty. Under this liberal autocratic setting, on the one

hand, the absence of popular elections as a mechanism for choosing the government means that state actors are not under the uncertainty of losing their official positions in electoral competition and are thus not strongly compelled to be responsive to popular demands when making public policy. As a result, the state's inherent approach to social policymaking remains well-entrenched. The state's policy networks remain exclusive and relatively impervious to outside influence. On the other hand, electoral competition, though limited, creates incentives for legislators to attack the government's policy failures and shortcomings as a way of gaining popularity. Opposition parties and even pro-establishment parties are compelled to collaborate with civil society as a way to pressurize the government to make policy changes. Even though the chief executive is elected by an Election Committee of 800 electors, most of whom belong to the pro-establishment camp, more and more the Election Committee has become an avenue for sectoral interests to make demands on the "candidate" in exchange for their votes. In 2007, the success of the opposition camp in nominating a second candidate to run for the election also put extra pressure on the chief executive candidate handpicked by the Chinese government to be responsive to popular demands, essentially bringing important social policy issues onto the public agenda and compelling the chief executive "designate" to make certain electoral promises. Thus even though state leaders are not faced with the "uncertainty" of election, their reliance on the support of sectoral interests and good policy performance as a source of legitimacy means they have to respond to societal demand.

In this sense, the collaboration of civil society groups, opposition parties and politicians may generate societal mobilization strong enough to pressurize the state to make policy change. The findings of this paper will show that compared with Asian liberal democracies, there is much less room for collaboration between the state and societal actors. Mobilization has to be much more confrontational in order for it to have policy impact. Under the semi-democratic setting, social mobilization may make an impact on the state through highly contentious activities rather than through building broad consensus, shaping social citizenship, and constructing alternative policy discourse. Likewise, state actors may make concessions out of political pressure rather than fundamental change in official position or policy learning. As a result social policy change tends to be disjointed and incremental. Lastly, while Hong Kong has a longer history of civil liberty than South Korea and Taiwan, it has not experienced the strong exogenous shock brought about by the democratic movement in the latter two countries. Thus while there is robust civil society activities in Hong Kong, the civil society is actually not as strongly organized. Such weak organization is witnessed in social mobilization, which entails coalition of a smaller scale.

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