

EXPERIENCING REPRESSION IN HYBRID
REGIMES: THE CASE OF HONG KONG

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I hope this thesis can showcase the suffering of the people under the ruling of autocrats, letting all of us be aware of the inherent wrong nature of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

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Abstract

Political repression is a critical inquiry in political science, while the study of non-violent repression, namely soft repression, has recently grabbed the attention of scholars with an increasing trend. However, the current literature regarding soft repression shows a gap in the hybrid regime context and the individual understanding and response to such type of repression. This thesis investigates the case of Hong Kong regarding the soft repression experience encountered by Hong Kong District Councilors under such a hybrid regime context. This thesis asks three questions: 1. How does the state repress institutionalized activists by soft repression? 2. How do activists understand the soft repression imposed by the state? 3. How do the activists respond to the repression imposed by the state? Nineteen in-depth interviews with the in-office and former District Councilors were conducted to answer the above questions. The findings showcase that these "institutionalized activists" faced dilemmas and repression from both inside and outside the institution. At the same time, they expressed their worries about the consequences of repression beyond their sentimental feelings, namely the social implications of repression to themselves. Additionally, from the interview results, these interviewees' responses to soft repression illustrate a strong alignment with the current literature. In sum, this thesis expands our understanding of activists' individual experiences with repression, as well as their tactical response under a such constrained environment.

Introduction

Social movement activists face political repression when they challenge the existing establishment power, where the authority may employ different tactical measures in order to maintain their stability. In the literature on social movement and contentious politics, regime repression could be divided into hard repression and soft repression (Earl, 2006). Hard repression consists of violent acts, while in contrast, soft repression, as argued by Ferree (2004), is the use of non-violent means to silence or eradicate opponents.

Hard repression has grabbed scholarly attention over the years, while the discussion on soft repression is limited (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020). Although there is research addressing the modus operandi under a democratic regime (see Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020) or authoritarian regime (see Deng & O'Brien, 2013), a research gap could be seen in the context of hybrid regimes. Additionally, While the existing limited literature on soft repression focuses on the practice of soft repression by state or non-state actors (Fallon et al., 2018; García, 2013; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020), there is a rare amount of literature that focuses on the individual experience suffering regime repression, such as their internal understanding of the consequences of repression, as well as their actions taken in response to the regime repression.

In this vein, this article asks the following three research questions: 1. How does the state repress institutionalized activists by soft repression? 2. How do activists understand the soft repression imposed by the state? 3. How do the activists respond to the repression imposed by the state? This study takes the case of the soft repression experience undergone by District Councilors in Hong Kong. The case provides a new angle on understanding the struggles and decision-making process of activists' activism under a hybrid regime with the democratic backsliding feature.

After the landslide victory by the pro-democracy camp in the District Council Election held in 2019, the Hong Kong government and the pro-Beijing camp continued to repress pro-democracy District Councilors through both institutionalized and non-institutionalized means. Some of them were harassed or dogged by the pro-Beijing supporters, secret agents from the police, and journalists from the state-affiliated media, while others might have defamed or accused by the government or state-affiliated media of not duly discharging their duties or misusing public resources. The mass resignation of District Councilors happened in July 2021 due to the potential risk of being disqualified from their seats or even prosecuted by the government. While most of them have left the system, some of the pro-democracy District Councilors remained in the system, and more or less continued their activism within the institution. What are the actual repression techniques the state has imposed on them? And furthermore, what is their internal understanding and response to the state's (soft) repression? Is anything different in terms of the response made by activists under a hybrid regime with an autocratization context? By employing the case of Hong Kong, the puzzles could be solved and deepen our understanding of soft repression.

This thesis employs the method of in-depth interviews. Totally 19 interviews have been done with both remaining and resigned pro-democracy District Councilors in Hong Kong. By examining the soft repression that they have faced, the decision-making process of staying or resigning, and their response to the repression, we can deepen our understanding of soft repression, especially from the angle of activists, in a regime facing democratic backsliding.

This research contributes to the current debate on political repression in various ways. First, it showcases the modus operandi of soft repression imposed on activists in hybrid regimes with democratic backsliding characteristics, which would be helpful to further compare the

difference in soft repression between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Also, the study provides a new understanding of soft repression not just from the activist's sentiments angle, but also from the social meaning of repression to the activists themselves.

The thesis is organized as follows: the next section will review the concept of political repression. The case background of Hong Kong District Councilors being, from a landslide victory to mass resignation, will be presented, and the methodology will follow. Next, the in-depth interview content with the in-office and resigned pro-democracy District Councilors and the associated discussion will be presented. Lastly, a conclusion will be drawn.

Literature Review

Political repression

Repression is a key subject of inquiry in political science, especially in the field of authoritarian studies. Davenport (2007) defines political repression as:

"The actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions." (Davenport, 2007, p.2)

Political repression is the act of the state authority that infringes fundamental human rights as stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Gohdes, 2014). Gohdes (2014) further argues that sanctions brought by political repression are twofold: violation of civil liberty rights and physical integrity rights. While civil liberty rights include different kinds of freedoms such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion (Gohdes, 2014), physical integrity rights refer to the right to be free from being tortured, extrajudicial killed, imprisoned for political beliefs or disappeared (Cingranelli & Richards, 2010).

Soft repression

Some scholars categorize political repression by its extent of violence. The less violent one is called "soft repression", while the more violent one is called "hard repression" (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020). Ferree (2004) contends that while hard repression employs means by force or coercion to control oppositions from mobilization, soft repression silences or eradicates dissidents by non-violent means. The author proposes that soft repression could be defined as

"the mobilization of non-violent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas." (Ferree, 2004: 88).

There are many instruments or means that the regime could employ from political repression, ranging from legal to illegal or from less violent to extreme violent means (Davenport, 2007). Davenport (2007) proposes that harassment, spying or surveillance, arrests, torture to mass killing are some typical repressive techniques of political repression by the state. Scott (1985) expands the example of (soft) repressive techniques and presents a concept named "steady pressure". The concept refers to the everyday fear suffered by opposition originating from "occasional arrests, warnings, diligent police work, legal restrictions, and an Internal Security Act" (Scott, 1985: 274) as imposed by the regime.

Ferree (2004) categorizes three types of soft repression strategies and their aims, namely ridicule, stigma, and silencing; at the micro-level, ridicule refers to negative labelling imposed to mock dissidents' individuality and its aims at weakening the mobilizations of cultural challenges. Next, at meso-level, stigma is a level up of the use of ridicule, which aims at discrediting and devaluating the collective identity of the whole group of dissidents. Lastly, on the macro level, silencing means the execution of the voice of dissidents from the media since the media functions as an essential role for dissidents to voice out and foster mobilization.

Although Ferree (2004) initially argues that soft repression is employed by civil society actors, there are cases showing that soft repression could also be employed by state actors as well (Deng & O'Brien, 2013; Fallon et al.; García, 2014; Honari, 2018a; Lindekilde, 2010). García (2014) and Lindekilde (2010) study the cases of soft repression imposed by the government in democratic countries, namely Spain and Denmark; Deng and O'Brien (2013), Honari (2018a),

and Fallon et al. (2018) cover the cases in authoritarian states which are China, Iran, and Ghana respectively.

Regime type is vital to understanding political repression (DeMeritt, 2016), and political repression would take place in all kinds of regimes, namely democratic, hybrid or authoritarian (Henderson, 1991). However, the existing literature lacks an illustration of soft repression techniques employed by the hybrid regime authority (except for Yew (2016)). Some authors even argue that hybrid regimes have the tendency to employ soft repression to avoid criticism for failing to enforce the international human rights treaty (Fallon et al., 2018). As such, this thesis seeks to fill this gap by presenting the case of Hong Kong, an autonomous region under the ruling of China with hybrid-regime features (Fong, 2017; Ma, 2007).

Experience of (soft) political repression

Honari (2018b) suggests that political repression experienced by dissidents could be disentangled into "experienced repression" and "perceived repression". "Experienced repression" refers to "experienced repression as individuals' actual experiences of state repression" (Honari, 2018b, p.2), and it could be divided into "direct experience" and "indirect experience". While "perceived repression" is defined as "individuals' perceptions about obstacles and threats to political participation imposed by the state." (Honari, 2018b, p.2). This refers to one's subjective judgment on how the repression events may affect the risk-taking in their own political activities. Honari (2018b) adds that perceived repression could be divided into contextual (external) or individual (internal) dimensions, in which contextual refers to their subjective assessment of the overall political repression situation in the state, while individual refers to the assessment of their personal political risks. The division is helpful for further understanding the micro-mobilization of dissidents themselves.

What is the empirical experience of soft repression imposed by the regime suffered by dissidents? For democratic states, Jämte and Ellefsen (2020) study the case of the radical left-libertarian movement (RLLM) in Sweden, illustrating the demobilization effects of labelling and stigmatization of the radical groups by the government. In Spain, protesters face administrative sanctions, overwhelming ID checks by the police, and control by apolitical by-laws in participating in anti-corruption protests from the government (García, 2014). For authoritarian states, relevant works are somewhat limited: Moss (2018) discusses the case of activists in exile or diasporas of Syrian being harassed on their social media platforms by pro-regime agents; Peña et al. (2021) showcase the psychosocial conditions of dissidents in n Colombia, Kenya, and Indonesia, after continuous harassment by the pro-government agents. Deng and O'Brien (2013) demonstrate a commonly used soft repressive technique by the Chinese government - "Relational repression", and how it can demobilize the protestors by harassing the friends and relatives of the activists. Honari (2018a) showcases the effects of soft repression from the government on Iran's Green movement activists to their online activism. It is even rare to see literature regarding soft repression in hybrid regimes: Fallon et al. (2018) illustrate the case in Ghana, in which they document the repressive experience of dissidents from a macro-level perspective by looking at the mobilization of state resources and counter framing techniques towards protestors who push forward for the passage of the Domestic Violence Bill.

The current literature remains a considerable gap on how dissidents perceive and understand repression (Earl, 2011; Moss, 2014). It is expected that in a hybrid regime with a democratic backsliding feature, the intensity of (soft) political repression will increase. Also, due to its nature of democratic backsliding, referring to the situation of moving towards a more authoritarian side from more democratic states, repressive techniques imposed by the state are

expected to be unsophisticated in its initial stage. Meanwhile, dissidents need to learn how to position themselves in this worsening situation. These features are unique in a hybrid regime with a democratic backsliding setting, which differs from democratic and authoritarian regimes. Thus, by looking at the case of Hong Kong, it could further enhance our comprehension of the dissident's understanding of empirical and in-person repressive experience in such a type of regime.

Activist's response to soft repression

The current studies of political repression have not yet reached a consensus on the effects of political repression on social movements or activism (Akhremenko & Petrov, 2020; Opp & Roehl, 1990). Some argue that political repression poses a negative effect on dissident's mobilization (e.g. Boykoff, 2013; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Wood, 2007), while others argue that it might later provoke more protests (e.g. Blumenau, 2015; Ellefsen, 2021; Leenders, 2013). The vast variation in explanations of the effects of political repression by different scholars, as discussed by Honari (2017), is because of the overlooking of individuals' agency in responding to political repression. Due to the different interpretations and thinking on "experienced repression" and "perceived repression" by every single individual, individuals respond to political repression differently. While some might stop the continuation of their activism, others might carry on or might even further change their resistance strategies.

Honari (2018b) offers a "Choice points" scheme for a better understanding of an individual's response to political repression. In Choice point 1, when suffering political repression, dissidents could either choose to accept or reject. The former refers to withdrawing their activism, while the latter corresponds to the continuation of it. Next, in Choice point 2, if dissidents chose to keep on their activism, available strategies could be chosen and adopted,

such as mobilization network reformation, reframing or publicizing repression, constructing a motivational frame, or managing fearful emotions. Lastly, due to different reasons, such as availability or change of target, dissidents might shift their tactics, arena, issue of protest, or identity, and this comes to Choice point 3. Honari (2018b) stresses that the scheme is critical for understanding the micro-mobilization of individuals in a repressive context, which has been widely neglected by past studies. By starting from the Choice points of individuals, one can broaden the understanding of the dynamics and development of a social movement by a bottom-up approach from the perspective of micro-level to macro-level. As such, this thesis would try to expand the examples of Choice point 3, namely the tactical responses under soft repression context, by interviewing the (ex-)District Councilors in Hong Kong. In addition, the root causes behind such employment of tactics and strategies to these activists themselves could be understood as well.

Case Background

From the road to a landslide victory in District Council Election

The Hong Kong government introduced the *Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019* in February 2019, which was called Extradition Bill subsequently. The Pro-democracy camp worried about the Extradition Bill would be abused by the Chinese and Hong Kong government to transfer dissidents from Hong Kong to mainland China. Later on, the introduction of the Extradition Bill provoked Hongkongers to take to the streets and initiated numerous mobilizations, such as rallies, marches, human-chain, online campaigns, etc. One of the core motos widely agreed by protesters is that moderate and radical or institutionalized or non-institutionalized repertoires are not mutually exclusive (Chung, 2020). As in line with the moto, opposition elites and protesters actively participated in the subsequent District Council Election held in November of the same year as one of the repertoires of the movement (Ku, 2020; Shum, 2021). Unlike the previous District Council Elections, all the constituencies in this election had at least one Pro-democracy candidate contesting. The internal solidarity and broad public support led to the landslide victory by opposition candidates in the elections: with the backdrop of a record-breaking 71.23% voter turnout, the opposition candidates, representing movement momentum, won 389 over 452 constituencies and gained the majority in 17 District Councils over 18 of them (Fong, 2022; Lee, 2020; Shum 2021). Such an electoral outcome is the first-ever time for the Pro-democracy camp to dominate the District Council in the history of Hong Kong.

The activism of the "Institutionalized activists"

While the District Council in Hong Kong has no legislative power and is more likely to be an advisory body, political actors in Hong Kong have utilized District Council as a platform not just to address community issues, but also political ideologies and issues over the years (Lam,

2021). It has no exception in the 6th District Council Session under the control of the Pro-democracy camp. Pro-democracy District Councilors have been observed using their mandate and resources gained from the institution to support the resistance towards the government. These "institutionalized activists", similar to the paradox of opposition parties in a hybrid regime setting presented by Bertrand (2021), participate and oppose the system parallelly. In line with the features proposed by Bertrand (2021), Hong Kong Pro-democracy District Councilors have shown performing "Denunciation" by making use of the institutional resources to expose the government's wrongdoings, such as questioning police brutality issues and revealing the policy failure of the government's anti-pandemic measures in the District Council meetings. Meanwhile, Pro-democracy District Councilors also utilized the financial resources gained from their seats to mobilize dissent, such as making use of their subsidized community offices to run polling stations for the 2020 Hong Kong Pro-democracy primaries for the subsequent 2020 Legislative Council Election. More than half of 610,000 people voted in primaries, which gave out a signal of resistance to the Hong Kong and Beijing authorities.

Government's crackdown on the institutionalized activists

As such, there were confrontations between the government and these institutionalized activists. In response, the government refused to cooperate with the Pro-democracy District Councilors or warn them that they have violated different administrative guidelines and regulations. In some District Council meetings, the in-attendance government officials walked out of the meeting to protest against the District Councilors when motions condemning the police or the government officers were passed. The government also issued statements alleging that certain Pro-democracy District Councilors violated the code of conduct for District Councilors. Some news reports illustrate that the government refused to release the reimbursement to certain

District Councilors as they were suspected of misusing the allowances for activities that were "irrelated to the business of the District Council".

Following the enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law in July 2020, the Hong Kong government later introduced the *Public Offices (Candidacy and Taking Up Offices) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Ordinance 2021*. The legislation passed in May 2021, demanding that all public officers, including those in-office District Councilors, have to take the oath to showcase their endorsement to the Basic Law of Hong Kong and pledge loyalty to Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region under the ruling of China. Rumours were spread by the government, and it circulated in the media before the passage of the Bill that there might be severe legal consequences, including imprisonment if their seats were later disqualified in the oath-taking. They might also be required to return all the honorarium and allowance since the start of their office. 260 Pro-democracy District Councilors resigned from the post before the oath-taking commenced. Subsequently, the oath-taking took place in September 2021 and ended in early October 2021. In total, 58 Pro-democracy District Councilors were eventually disqualified due to invalid oath-taking as solely judged by the government without giving out substantial reasons. In the end, over 70% of the seats of the District Councils in total were vacant, and the Pro-Beijing camp regained the majority in 7 (over 18) District Councils.

With this backdrop, as non-violent threats and repression from the state were faced by these institutionalized activists, their experiences are worth studying for further understanding of soft repression taking place in a hybrid regime with a democratic backsliding feature.

Methodology

This thesis adopted a semi-structured interview method with 19 current and former Pro-democracy District Councilors in Hong Kong as interviewees. All the interviews were conducted between February and March 2022. Most of the interviewees stayed in Hong Kong (N=16) during the interview, while some of them left the territory (N=3). All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, and key quotes were later translated into English to be shown in this thesis.

As these interviewees are public figures and politicians, their contacts are usually publicly accessible. As a former assistant to one of the District Councilors, I have connections with other current and former District Councilors. As having access advantage, I adopted the purposive interview method, in which I chose interviewees with whom I have connections, and I invited interviewees by sending direct messages to their Facebook page and WhatsApp account, and email, respectively. Later, I also sent invitations to other District Councilors covering all 18 districts. While there were a considerable number (N=398) of current and former pro-democracy District Councilors in total, I tried to send out as many invitations as possible. I sent out 68 invitations and finally conducted 19 interviews in the end. The response rate is 27.9%. Five interviewees were still in office when the interview was conducted, while fourteen of them had left the post due to self-resignation or disqualification. The interviewees' backgrounds cover ten out of eighteen Districts Councils.

Most interviews (N=15) were done online due to the surge of Covid-19 cases in Hong Kong, while some interviewees still asked for physical interviews (N=4) for different reasons. Protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees is of paramount importance in conducting interviews (Lobe et al., 2020). Taking such a precaution is especially important in

an authoritarian setting, as fieldwork on sensitive subjects might risk both respondents and researchers (Yusupova, 2019). Also, with the potential political risks of doing interviews in such an environment, researchers have to ensure that the personal safety of the interviewees would not be jeopardized by the research (Fu & Simmons, 2021). Thus, this thesis employed a secure and highly anonymous online conferencing platform, namely "Jitsi Meet". There are several benefits of this platform (see Byrne et al., 2020; Lobe et al., 2020): first, for anonymity concerns, it does not require any login credentials or account, and the caller ID could be make-up as well. Next, regarding confidentiality, the platform supports not only end-to-end encryption but also a password lock and waiting room function for participant access control in order to prevent surveillance from hackers.

After checking that the connections were secured, I introduced myself and read aloud the interview disclaimer, mentioning the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewee, as well as asking whether they had questions before proceeding to the interview questions.

Interviewees were asked questions regarding their political background, experience in activism, subjective and objective judgments regarding the broader political context of Hong Kong, their perceived political risk, and the future planning for their activism.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the interviews, and how they could answer the three research questions: 1. How does the state repress institutionalized activists by soft repression? 2. How do activists understand the soft repression imposed by the state? 3. How do the activists respond to the repression imposed by the state?

How does the state repress institutionalized activists by soft repression?

Weakening their institutional role

The current literature on political repression in hybrid regimes mainly focuses on the electoral manipulation by the incumbent in order to secure the victory in executive and legislative elections (see Ottaway (2003) and Schedler (2002)). However, the discussion on the political repression, including the soft repression experience inside the institution encountered by the opposition politicians, has been neglected. Meanwhile, the interviewees in this research showcase their struggles and soft repression experience inside the system.

Having an institutional role, these institutionalized activists have official work partnerships with the incumbent government within the institution. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they felt the government tried to weaken their institutional roles in different dimensions. The most cited example is the unreasonable administrative delay in budgeting by the District Council Secretariat and other government departments:

"The Home Affairs Department has unreasonably blocked approval on budgeting by different administrative excuses... I think this is because some Pro-Beijing stakeholders do not want Pro-democracy District Councilors could make use of the funding from the District Council

to make political achievements to the citizens" (Interviewee 4, Personal interview, March 4, 2022)

Apart from the budgeting blockage within the District Council, other institutional roles in other government committees and departments, such as the membership in the government-led District Management Committee, as well as the privilege to visit detainees or prisoners via Official visit service, have been deprived:

"Starting from 2020 (the commencement of the sixth session of the District Council), District Councilors were not invited to participate in the District Management Committee. This adds difficulty for us to meet the higher-ranking government officials in the District to reflect opinions and have discussions. It also turns out as obstructing the execution of the District Councils Ordinance as it stipulates that District Councils are responsible for advising the government on matters of the District." (Interviewee 13, Personal interview, March 2, 2022)

"The Correctional Service Department refused the Pro-democracy District Councilors to do Official visits by using the covid-19 pandemic as an excuse. I think this is because of my Pro-democracy political affiliation. The government wants to deprive the rights and privileges inside the institution in order to reduce the duties that we can perform. This leads to the marginalization of the role of District Councilors." (Interviewee 16, Personal interview, March 4, 2022)

Censor their channels of expression gained from their seats

As suggested by Ferree (2004), silencing is a macro-level soft repression tactic, referring to the limitation of expression and voice in civil society in order to convey the momentum to the mass

media. Meanwhile, Levitsky and Way (2002) point out that authoritarian governments, such as the case in Peru in 1992 and Russia in 1993, might try to cease the functioning of the legislature in order to climate the exposure and activities of the opposition in the Council. In this research, interviewees responded that the government tried to censor their channels of expression gained from their seats, including the attempt to shut down the official District Council meetings and the censorship of their promotional materials.

One of the official duties of District Councilors is to attend District Council meetings and discuss matters regarding public services within the District for advising the government. However, most of the interviewees reflected that different government departments and the District Council Secretariat (which is under the leadership of the Home Affairs Department) limit the scope of discussion of District Councils by arguing that some agendum is irrelevant to the District and violate the *District Councils Ordinance*, and then refused to provide secretarial support or even leave the meeting room when the "irrelevant "discussion starts:

"There are huge limitations on the scope of the discussion within the Council. Sometimes we would like to discuss some political affairs, but the Home Affairs Department would censor the content of the discussion... For example, the District Council Secretariat would eliminate certain items from the agenda. Also, they might refuse to provide secretarial support and meeting venue, or walk out of the meeting if the government deems the topic is not the business of the District." (Interviewee 5, Personal interview, March 5, 2022)

Also, As elected public officials, conventionally, the government reserved some display areas on the streets or inside the public estate buildings for them to display banners or posters. However, many interviewees reflected that some government departments censor the content

of their promotion materials by different excuses, such as the content causes "defamation" or "negative effects to the social harmony". Most of them received verbal warnings from government officials, while some even received warning letters from the government departments, stating that they were suspected of breaching the terms of conditions of the display area:

"I tried to hang a banner regarding the commemoration of the June 4 massacre. In the evening of the same day, I received a letter from the Lands Department notifying me that the banner display area had been cancelled since the content of it "harms social harmony". The next day, they removed the banner and later asked me to pay a fine for the clearance... I think it is a form of political repression because the government has no right to remove the banner without concrete reason and justification and because the content is unfavourable to the government, ". (Interviewee 15, Personal interview, March 1, 2022)

Material resources being deprived

Uneven access to resources is one of the strategies that might be employed by the incumbent in Competitive Authoritarian states to repress the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that incumbents might directly use state financial resources to fund their parties, as well as dominate the access to funding from the private sector. In the case of Hong Kong, there is a subtle difference, in which rather than funding the Pro-establishment parties with public funding, the Hong Kong government creates obstacles for the opposition in accessing the financial subsidies from the government.

There is a considerable amount of honorarium and allowances for the District Councilors in order to support their service to the constituencies. The District Councilors get the allowances

from the District Council Secretariat through a reimbursement mechanism. Some interviewees claimed that they were severe delays in getting reimbursements or were even unable to get them, which seriously obstructed the operation of their office and their service:

"After the Pro-democracy primaries, I filed reimbursement applications to the District Council Secretariat, but I could not get the reimbursements after one month. I then asked the Secretariat, and they told me that my office was suspected of holding polling stations for the primaries thus, the application could not be processed... The government accused it (holding the primaries) of not complying with the duties of District Councillors... I think the government does not want the opposition District Councillors could utilize the resources from the government organizing political activities." (Interviewee 8, Personal Interview, March 5, 2022).

Harassment from the police

Harassment from the police is a typical soft repression tactic for the authority to restrain the opposition. García (2014) showcases the modus operandi of Spain police which practised "administrative sanctions" on protestors by checking their IDs excessively in order to limit protestors' activities. Back to the case of Hong Kong, the respondents also shared their experiences with the harassment from the police force.

Some interviewees also expressed that they have faced different kinds of harassment from the law enforcement on different occasions, ranging from receiving phone calls from the police asking about their recent activities, frequent ID checks when holding street booths, being scolded by police officers for foul language in protests, etc.:

"Officers from the Police Public Relations Branch would call me and ask what community activities am I planning to organize recently. I feel harassed since I think that I don't have the responsibility to report my planning to the government. This also adds pressure to the staff of my office and neighbourhood." (Interviewee 17, Personal Interview, March 3, 2022)

"I tried to ask for information about a blockade zone by the police in front of a Lennon wall.

However, the police officer physically pushed me and also my colleagues. I think this obstructed us from monitoring law enforcement by the police and whether the citizens were fairly treated... The police officers were also unkind, and even asked us whether we were trying to taunt them." (Interviewee 15, Personal Interview, March 1, 2022)

Rumours as a repression

Spreading rumours could be a soft repression strategy for the incumbent government, creating a sense of fear and silencing the activities of the opposition. Young (2019) suggests that rumours could be a form of informational signal for accessing the political risk and also cause fear. Meanwhile, Perice (1997) illustrates that rumours also create a sense of confusion while providing a picture of "social reality" to the recipients as well. In contrast to the transmission of rumours suggested in Haiti by Perice (1997), referring to word of mouth, the interviewees shared that the Hong Kong government spread rumours to the media, letting the District Councilors and the general public circulate it around the society.

Interviewees reflected that the rumours circulated in the media regarding the consequences of disqualification of their seats after the oath-taking had given them colossal pressure. They think that the ambiguity of the National Security law and arbitrary law enforcement have made them worried, which fosters their ideas of doing self-censorship or even resignation:

"The rumours indeed gave me some pressure. I have calculated the amount [for the payback], which is at least 1.03 million dollars in total, and I don't think I can afford it. I also think that the standards and measurements for oath-taking are extraordinarily ambiguous and uncertain. This makes me very likely to be bankrupt. (Interviewee 18, Personal Interview, April 13, 2022)

"Indeed [the rumours] made me feel that some topics could not be expressed, and I have more self-restraint. I think this is because of the uncertainty of the "red line". This uncertainty brings me emotional pressure and leads me to self-censorship... I could never know the standards of the "red line"... I think the whole thing is a political controversy rather than a legal one." (Interviewee 19, Personal Interview, April 14, 2022)

How do the activists understand soft repression

Emphasis on the consequences of social sanctions

Jämte & Ellefsen (2020) argue that activists might be afraid of suffering social sanctions, such as finding jobs, apartments, and schooling. This is because the social sanction creates uncertainty about their future prospects. Hong Kong's case shares a similar pattern, in which some interviewees stressed their worries about the consequences of social sanctions, such as the limitations to their personal development after being bankrupt or the difficulties in finding a job after leaving the post.

"I was aware that being bankrupt would be a burden for me to get professional qualifications, such as obtaining a lawyer license... Therefore I decided to resign in order to mitigate the risk." (Interviewee 18, Personal interview, April 13, 2022)

"I have worries regarding the future after the end of my office. I have learned that some Non-governmental organizations are not willing to recruit people with Pro-democracy activism backgrounds since those organizations are concerned about the possibility of not receiving funding from the government. This makes my future livelihood difficult." (Interviewee 16, Personal interview, March 4, 2022)

Concerns about the safety and emotions of family members

Repression not only causes internal fear but also induces the imagination of activists of the consequences of soft repression. Boyoff (2007) argues that beyond personal safety, activists are also concerned about their in-group safety, such as the collective safety of their family relatives., In line with the findings by Boyoff (2007), Family issues are also one of the concerns of the interviewees. Many of them reveal that the safety or emotions of their family members are one of the concerns in making their decisions in activism. This is especially important for those who have children:

"... I have been criticized indirectly without my name by some government officials before, threatening me that my seat will be disqualified. Then this was shown on the news report, and my parents were noticed, which made them ask me to consider for resignation. This is one of the reasons for my subsequent resignation... Meanwhile, I also found that being bankrupt might pose negative impacts on my children's further studies. Thus, I later resigned"
(Interviewee 11, Personal interview, March 2, 2022)

"My family members pressured me for resignation. They cannot bear the political pressure rooted from my seat. Meanwhile, they were worried about my personal safety." (Interviewee 10, Personal interview, March 3, 2022)

Referencing the experience of others

In order to access the political risks, referencing others' experiences is one of the ways to do so in a constrained environment (Young, 2019). Similar to the trajectory suggested by Young (2019), Many interviewees shared that the ambiguity of the law enforcement has made them confused and difficult to assess their political risks. They mainly assess the risk by discussing with others or referencing the experience of other cases, especially those related to District Councilors:

"I have participated in the primaries... Thus I have substantial risks of being arrested [because of the primaries], but the timing is unknown. After discussing it with my friends, I eventually left Hong Kong... I referenced my political activists and other arrestees, which is more or less the same" (Interviewee 4, Personal interview, March 4, 2022)

How do the activists respond to the soft repression

Self-coping mechanism: feel unsurprised by the repression

Honori (2018a) articulates the experience of some Iran activists that risks vary in terms of importance to themselves, referring to while some of them are expected to face repression, and some of them do not. As for the case of Hong Kong, having a subtle difference, a certain number of interviewees, no matter whether they eventually have remained in their seats or resigned, expressed that they felt unsurprised by the potential political risks. One of the interviewees said that he is expected to face some political risks, and it is just a matter of time as other Pro-democracy figures or organizations have been repressed by the government:

"As the current remaining oppositional force, I think there are political risks for us. Especially when you see other civil society organizations are disbanded, other oppositional

forces, including myself, will be subsequently repressed. It is just a matter of time, whether it is earlier or later... I think this mindset has been rooted in my mind since the commencement of my office." (Interviewee 9, Personal interview, February 24, 2022)

Some of them said that it is because they are still young or without heavy family burdens, which makes them more capable of bearing risks and starting over. Others even mentioned that they are ready to be bankrupt or even imprisonment:

"I think my financial assets are not that much, and I also don't have a family burden, which makes me less afraid of being bankrupt... For arrest and imprisonment, I also feel like I am mentally prepared for it... Since my allies are being arrested, as the time goes by, I am preparing it along the way, and eventually, get used to it." (Interviewee 3, Personal interview, March 3, 2022)

"I am really not afraid of the consequences brought by my political career... For me, being arrested, not being able to leave the territory, and my family members being followed are expected. I will take it when it comes." (Interviewee 12, Personal interview, February 25, 2022)

Remain in office

Whether to leave or stay within the system is a struggle for activists themselves, while the current literature fails to address the dimension. Some interviewees reveal that they see staying in-office as a kind of response or even a form of resistance.

Although there were mass resignations by more than half of the Pro-democracy District Councilors in total, part of them stayed in the institution and took the oath. Some of them even passed the oath-taking ceremony and continued their Councilor status. "Commitment to the constituencies" is one of the reasons that made them not resign:

"I have always thought about leaving the post in order to avoid legal risks. However, I think it is unreasonable for me to self-resigning. Therefore, I tried to stay behind and try my best to finish my term. This is also a commitment to my constituencies for the full 4-year term. I will try my best to fulfil it." (Interviewee 8, Personal interview, March 5, 2022)

Some of them revealed that they think their continuation in office could give some encouragement to the public, signalling that some people are still carrying on:

"I wish my choice to remain in office could bring positive effects to the public, telling the public that someone is still carrying on." (Interviewee 13, Personal interview, March 2, 2022).

Change of arena

Honori (2018b) proposes that change of arena, such as the swapping physical to online participation, is one of the strategies that activists might adopt. This is to avoid substantial political risks that hinder their activism and mobilization. In a similar vein, for those leaving the institution, most of them expressed that they were trying other ways to continue their activism. While some of the interviewees have left Hong Kong, they participated in the Hong Kong diasporic movements overseas:

"I am pushing the mobilization of the Hongkongers diaspora in the UK in writing letters to the local politicians, to let them know and concern about the situation in Hong Kong. This can foster lobbying work in the UK government regarding Hong Kong issues... I also provided assistance to new Hong Kong immigrants to the UK, in order to link them up and solidize their concerns towards Hong Kong" (Interviewee 7, Personal interview, February 26, 2022)

"I think leaving Hong Kong is a strategy for me... Staying in Hong Kong made me unable to practise my freedom of speech in order to do advocacy. While I went overseas, I am free to work on my advocacy... this can lower political risks compared to doing the same thing in Hong Kong." (Interviewee 4, Personal interview, March 4, 2022)

Meanwhile, those who stayed in Hong Kong, some of them revealed their plan to involve in politics through the business sector:

"I am trying to do some small-scale business in order to meet up some people who are rich in resources and to let me utilize their resources by mobilizing my neighbourhood. I also think that being a rich-in-resources person could help prepare the later resistance movements" (Interviewee 10, Personal interview, March 3, 2022)

"I am now trying to participate in politics from the business sector... Before my resignation, I wished to organize a community festival. For now, I might do the festival through commercial means... I think this kind of community activity is a kind of political expression, and it might unite the civil society... It might also bring challenges to the government." (Interviewee 12, Personal interview, February 25, 2022)

Alleviating political risk for survival

Maintaining (political) survival is fundamental to one's political participation. Many interviewees expressed that staying low-profile is one of the initiatives to take due to the current deteriorating political environment. Some of them mentioned that they are waiting for later political opportunities, such as another mass mobilization:

"I will keep myself low-profile for the time being since I cannot think of any political movement to push for right now. I will now mitigate my political risks, avoid being arrested, and wait for another political opportunity for further planning" (Interviewee 3, Personal interview, March 3, 2022)

"I will now less expose myself in the public domain and keep myself low-profile. I might even keep silent on some "big" issues. For now, I would focus on the grassroots issue, and try not to touch the red-line, avoiding political risks." (Interviewee 13, Personal interview, March 2, 2022)

Promoting Civic (democracy) education

In addition to the responses discussed in the previous literature, promoting civic (democracy) education to the citizens is one of the most mentioned strategies. For both remaining and resigned interviewees, most of them emphasized the importance of civic (democracy education). They opine that encouraging citizens to reflect on their public lives, keeping the community network, and letting them know their political rights, are essential for the preparation of later mobilization:

"[After the resingation] I kept on holding some social issues to attract attention from my neighbourhood. I hope this can make them think about public affairs... I will choose to handle some insensitive political issues as the political risk is lower, and it is easier for the neighbourhood to understand." (Interviewee 10, Personal interview, March 3, 2022)

"I wish to push more innovative community initiatives, such as holding forums for opinion collection or funding community newspapers for strengthening the bonding of the community. I think it is still to unite the community and increase their sense of belonging to the community and enhance their civic-mindedness. In the long run, it would help the democratization. It can be seen as a seed of democratic movement." (Interviewee 1, Personal interview, March 3, 2022)

Conclusion

This thesis showcases the soft repression techniques of the state, and the individual experience, understanding and response to the imposed repression, by taking the case of Hong Kong's District Councilors with an in-depth interview method. Existing literature on soft repression mainly focuses on either the soft repression techniques by the state or the repression experience and constraints faced by the activists, with a focus on either democratic or authoritarian regimes. However, it lacks the account for considering the case for hybrid regimes. As such, this thesis offers empirical evidence in a hybrid regime of how the regime parallelly employs soft repression inside and outside the institution. Meanwhile, this thesis also showcases how the activists understand and respond to their "dual role" as politicians inside and activists outside the system. Thus, a new angle is offered in understanding the dynamics between the incumbent and (institutionalized) activists under a hybrid regime context.

To summarize the research findings, first, some soft repression techniques, such as censorship and harassment from the police, have been presented in this thesis and are in line with the previous literature. Additionally, this thesis enhances our knowledge that soft repression could not only happen in everyday life of activists or society but also be employed within the institution, including the obstruction in accessing public funding or weakening their institutional role.

Next, referring to the discussion of the understanding of repression by the activists, this thesis showcases that the social implication of repression has a far-reaching meaning for the activists. Based on the findings collected from the interview, interviewees usually contextualize and understand the possible effects and consequences of soft repression to themselves under the socio-economic context. Rather than expressing their emotions or psychological feelings about

their perceived repression experiences, they focus more on the social side, such as the imagination of social sanctions imposed by the state, Concerns about their relatives, and how they understand the repression effects by making reference to others.

This thesis also investigates the activists' responses to repression. From the response made by the institutionalized activists in the interviews, they display a form of self-coping mechanism for their psychological state, which refers to many of them anticipating suffering soft repression due to their role as activists cum politicians. Also, the interview results show that their response in terms of action is closely aligned with the current literature, including the change of arena and staying low profile. Meanwhile, regarding the interviewees' background from the District Council, they, in addition, suggest that remaining in the system, as well as civic education in the neighbourhood, is a form of resistance or preparation for future democratic movements.

As for the limitation of this thesis, firstly, the way to approach interviewees could be enhanced, as I have adopted a purposive interview method which might lead to bias since it relies on my personal connection. Nevertheless, in view of the interviewees' backgrounds have covered over half of the District Councils, and the findings of the thesis should be robust enough to enhance our understanding. Similar research could adopt the snowball sampling method to increase the reliability of the data and mitigate the potential bias. Also, as this research mainly focuses on the socio-economic understanding of soft repression to the activists themselves, further research could work on the cognitive process of activists on how they perceive and understand soft repression.

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