

Carrie Lam: Yes, Hong Kong Does Have a Future

I am listening. Conversation can triumph over conflict, calm can be restored, and trust can be rebuilt within the community.

Does Hong Kong have a future? It's not the first time such a question has been asked. But the question is being asked more and more often as the city faces a 17th week of social unrest.

The future certainly is on the minds of the hundreds of thousands of protesters who have taken to the streets over the past four months. The future is an issue that occupies much of my time, too. And it will be the question we, in Hong Kong, will discuss together on Thursday evening in the first of many community dialogues to air the public's grievances and identify the issues this society faces. Issues reflected in those dialogues will be studied and translated into concrete actions — into building a future together.

Some solutions will also be found in my upcoming annual Policy Address, which will set out bold initiatives to tackle deep-seated problems, such as access to affordable housing.

Hong Kong has faced — and overcome — momentous challenges every decade since the end of World War II. This should tell us something about the people of Hong Kong: They are resilient and resourceful. It should also tell us something about the values that the Hong Kong people share and our common aspiration for a bright future.

This summer's unrest is another transformative process — if a painful and, at times, depressingly violent one. I reject the use of violence to achieve any political, economic or social outcomes. Violence is not among the actions or values that most people associate with Hong Kong, which has a reputation as a safe and welcoming city. The radical actions of some rioters cannot dictate how to steer Hong Kong through its current difficulties.

Both the community dialogues and my Policy Address are part of a necessary reconciliation process. Deep wounds have been opened in our society. These will take time to heal. But it remains this government's hope that conversation will triumph over conflict and that through its actions, calm can be restored and trust can be rebuilt

within the community. To help create the atmosphere necessary for the community dialogues, I announced earlier this month the formal withdrawal of the bill to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, the so-called extradition bill. The amendments, which were designed to address the shortcomings of existing mechanisms for the surrender of fugitive criminals, were the catalyst for the protests.

For months now, the world has seen Hong Kong's people exercising their freedom of expression and freedom of protest. Peaceful protest has been a hallmark of Hong Kong society for decades, and it will remain so. The police have long facilitated such gatherings, which are 10 times more frequent now than in 1997. And the police did so this summer: From June to mid-September, more than 80 percent of requests for marches and gatherings were granted. But a worrisome pattern has emerged recently, with some organizers arranging large-scale marches that inevitably end in violent confrontations, vandalism and arson. The police must carefully weigh the people's right to protest against the risks of violent disruption to public order. (It should also be noted that if the police object to a certain protest, the organizers may lodge an appeal before an independent body.)

I believe that the rule of law, upheld by an independent judiciary, is a bedrock of Hong Kong life; it can never be compromised. But precisely because the rule of law is a bedrock principle, violent protests and wanton vandalism must stop. This is one reason that this administration cannot accede to some protesters' demand that all charges be dropped against those who have been arrested. Doing so would run counter to the rule of law. It would also contravene the Basic Law, which states that prosecutions must be taken forward, free from interference, by the Department of Justice.

Freedom of the press and freedom of information have also come into focus lately, partly because of the tsunami of media coverage about the protests, as well as other social, economic and political issues to do with Hong Kong. The city is a free and open economy and a global financial center, and the government understands that unfettered access to information is a prerequisite for the integrity and viability of its market — even though the media do not always paint Hong Kong in a positive or even impartial light.

And then, any discussion about Hong Kong's future needs to consider the ongoing implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. The rule of law, freedom of expression, a free press — all are part and parcel of how this principle

works in practice, and they help provide certainty in times of uncertainty. Hong Kong's business community has made it clear that the successful implementation of "One Country, Two Systems" is the make-or-break condition of the city's continued prosperity as a global hub for trade, finance, business, logistics and our arts and culture.

The rights and freedoms that make Hong Kong a special place within China are guaranteed under the city's Basic Law: its high degree of autonomy, its use of common law, its own immigration and customs regimes, a separate currency, its air-services agreements and shipping register — its own Olympic team.

In other words: The institutional framework for Hong Kong's future development already exists and it has been tested. Yet it needs to be leveraged further to make the best use of the "Two Systems" within the "One Country" and raise Hong Kong's profile as an international city. The development plan for the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macau Greater Bay Area unveiled earlier this year — to be implemented in strict accordance with "One Country, Two Systems" — promises to provide such opportunities.

No doubt, this summer's protests have had an impact on the immediate future of Hong Kong's economy, in particular its travel, hotel, retail and food-and-beverage sectors. People from all walks of life have been affected. The government is now working with those businesses to provide targeted measures to help alleviate some of their difficulties. And, as a small and highly open economy, Hong Kong will not escape the fallout of ongoing trade tensions between China and the United States. A recession is possible, if not likely, over the next year.

But we have significant fiscal reserves to draw on for countercyclical stimulus if needed. And billions of Hong Kong dollars have already been earmarked for infrastructure projects that will transform the face of our city in next few years: a third runway at our airport, a new business district in Kowloon East, a mega cultural district in West Kowloon, a new world-class sports park on the site of the old Kai Tak airport, significant new public spaces on both sides of our iconic Victoria Harbor.

Our financial markets continue to operate smoothly, and the linked exchange rate system that has served us well is as robust as ever. We have a stable currency; we continue to attract investment and I.P.O.s; there is growing interest in our development of innovation and technology, as well as arts and culture. The

fundamentals are very sound, and numerous major projects and initiatives are underway that will provide thousands of jobs and opportunities for young people to explore for years to come.

For the time being, however, I am in listening mode for my first community dialogue session. No doubt, I will receive some harsh criticism. But I also hope to receive constructive suggestions to help this government meet the public's expectations for a more inclusive and fairer Hong Kong.

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