

The evolution of civil unrest

The radical actions of a labour movement splinter group in Macau bear a strong resemblance to Hong Kong's own right of abode violence

Yenni Kwok in Macau

Less than half a year after the Portuguese colonial government departed the sleepy enclave, Macau experienced a new social awakening. In the city where street protests were virtually unheard of, jobless workers recently set up new labour groups and staged a number of rallies, demanding government action to solve their problems.

In a similar scenario to the right of abode protesters in Hong Kong, the formation of a more radical splinter group, which engaged in violent acts, has threatened the nascent movement. In Macau, it happened more quickly than among the residency seekers in Hong Kong: within weeks of the labour groups' formation, a rally at which violence led to police using tear-gas and water cannon may have nipped Macau's worker protest movement in the bud.

It is easier for small groups to become radical, says Chan Kin-man, associate professor of sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "A bigger group tends to be moderate. It contains different factions and opinions, and if it wants to survive, it has to compromise. On the other hand, the radical faction has to separate into a smaller group."

The same phenomenon is evident not only among right of abode seekers in Hong Kong, but also among Falun Gong members. Dr Chan warns that people in Hong Kong and Macau value stability and law and order - they have no sympathy for law-breakers. "If a social movement turns violent, it touches the nerves of the society."

In Macau, it all looked hopeful at first. The handover on December 19 ended the cultural alienation and language barrier between the citizens and their government. Chinese (including Cantonese and Putonghua) is one of the Macau SAR's official languages. The other is Portuguese. The Chief Executive, Edmund Ho Hau-wah, does not speak Portuguese.

"In the past, the lower-class people couldn't speak Portuguese and they were not confident dealing with the officials," says Jeremy Lei Man-chao, a member of the New Macau Association, the territory's most prominent civic group.

Since early May, there have been four labour protests and a fifth demonstration against police brutality. Up to 500 jobless workers joined the first protest on May 7. They marched to the office of the Chief Executive, demanding an end to the importation of foreign labour. Minor scuffles between police and protesters followed. From this protest, a new labour group was born. Called the Macau Labour Rights Mutual Help Association, it posed the first challenge since 1966 to the established, pro-Beijing Macau General

Labour Union. Their leaders organised two more protests, which also ended in scuffles with police.

Yet they managed to bring public attention and sympathy to the plight of the unemployed. People tended to blame the scuffles on the police's over-reaction or inexperience in handling demonstrations. Mr Ho expressed his sympathy with their cause and pledged to review the Government's labour importation scheme.

Riding high on public sympathy, another group of workers organised another protest, one which would ultimately reverse the flow of sentiment and support. On July 2, three unemployed workers set up another labour group, called the Macau Workers' Self-Help Association. A street protest followed, and around 100 people joined in. In less than an hour, the march turned into a violent clash. Television stations broadcast images of protesters throwing bamboo poles and stones at everybody around - police, passers-by and reporters. The police used tear-gas and a water cannon to quell the violence. The last time such strong measures were taken was when they suppressed the bloody Cultural Revolution riots in 1966. The violence chilled the workers as well. When the Self-Help Association organised a sit-in to protest against police brutality on July 9, only seven people turned up.

"The fourth demonstration hurt the labour movement," says Antonio Ng Kuok-cheong, a pro-democracy legislator and chief member of the New Macau Association. He is also an adviser to the Mutual Help Association. "We lost all the support on the Internet, radio programmes and Chinese newspapers in Macau. The activists feel society has given up on them."

Interestingly, both groups had help from Hong Kong unions after their Macau colleagues gave them the cold shoulder. A spokesman for the Macau General Labour Union denies the union was approached by the Self-Help Association, but admits refusing a request from the Mutual Help Association for a meeting.

"Many of their individual members criticised and attacked the General Labour Union, saying we didn't represent workers' interests or that we had sold out," says Kwan Tsui-hang, director of the General Labour Union's social affairs committee. "It is unacceptable for us. Mutual respect is the first pre-condition for establishing contacts."

The Mutual Help Association then turned to Hong Kong's older and more experienced labour groups. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions says it has close contacts with the Mutual Help Association, sharing lobbying experience and organisational know-how, as well as donating some money to the new group. "Normally when a trade union just begins to set up, they will get help from foreign countries or other foundations," says Wong Ying-yiu, the confederation's organising secretary.

He says the confederation was approached for funding by a person who claimed to represent the Self-Help Association, but it declined. "We don't know who is behind this group and what kind of people support them."

In recent years, unemployment in Macau has risen sharply. The Government puts the jobless figure at 7.1 per cent - the highest ever recorded. Social workers and economists believe the true figure could be as high as 10 per cent.

Much of the blame for this has been attributed to imported labourers and the government's lenient policy towards them. A total of 28,000 so-called "non-resident workers" are now employed in Macau. The mainland is the biggest source, contributing 25,000 workers to the migrant labour force.

The traditional source of work for many less-skilled workers, the construction and textile industries, uses many of the migrant workers. Macau people blame the migrants not only for taking jobs from locals, but also for lowering wages. The local labour force is also suffering other setbacks. Taiwan, which once provided ample opportunities for Macau workers, has tightened its policy on accepting foreign labour. Some years ago, the mainland pulled back from investing state capital in Macau.

On the surface at least, Macau's two new labour groups may appear similar. Both were organised by jobless workers, and pledge to fight for the cause of the unemployed. However, one is clearly trying to distance itself from the other.

The Self-Help Association is seen as representing the poorest of the workers - the jobless who have become homeless. Observers say it has "several" members while its self-appointed leaders claim 100, based on the number who attended their rally. It is loosely organised, with no structure or system for electing leaders. Nobody knows for sure who supports them financially. Some observers see them as radicals, some regard them as naive, desperate workers who could be exploited by other interests.

Kuok Wai-keong, 38, was a founder of the Self-Help Association. Since last year, he has been living in Iao Hon Park, where the July 2 protest started. The former construction worker has not found a job in the past two years and has taken casual work carrying vegetables and fruit between Zhuhai and Macau. If he can do three trips a day he can earn 30 patacas.

"The Government should look after the lowest strata of the working class because our situation is the most difficult," he says. "Most workers did not want a confrontation at the July 2 protest, but they were very frustrated." Another member gave a more desperate warning signal. "If the Government does not stop importation of labour, we will have no future. Maybe we will commit crime. At least, we will have food in prison," says Lei Kun-sam.

By contrast, the Mutual Help Association is more structured. Since it was established on June 15, it says it has registered more than 500 members. It has elected officials and an office in the industrial northern part of the city, where it holds weekly meetings.

The leaders say it is best to be cautious in protests and in seeking associate groups. "If we

don't restrain ourselves, the result will be unthinkable," says Wong Pui-lam, vice-president of the association.

Because they were uncertain who was behind the Self-Help group, the leaders of the Mutual Help Association turned down the invitation to join the rally on July 2. However, they agreed to wait for the protesters at the finish point to gesture their support. After violence erupted, they were quick to announce they were not behind the protest. The leaders also realised they had to dissociate themselves from the more radical group, but it was difficult for them to completely cut off contacts, due to overlapping memberships between the two organisations. "We also don't want to abandon them because they are the poorest kind," Mr Ng says. He says the Self-Help association often asks Mr Wong and Mr Lei for help with case applications to the social welfare department.

While the new labour groups were forming, other action was already being taken to improve things. In the first four months of this year, before the first street protest, the Government had reduced the number of migrant workers by 4,000 and promised to reduce it by 8,000 more by the end of the year. The General Labour Union in Macau claims credit for this move, having lobbied the Government to reduce the number of migrant workers.

Worried about further labour unrest, big business donated about HK\$8 million to the coffers of the General Labour Union to provide financial assistance to unemployed workers.

Following the July 2 protest, the Mutual Help Association called a halt to further protests for the time being. "We must establish internally first, to create more communication between leaders and members," Mr Ng says. The group has also held meetings with government agencies, including the Labour Bureau and the Social Welfare Department. "We have to create a good relationship with the society and the Government," he says.

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