



COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND PHENOMENON OF OPPORTUNISTIC REPRESSION AGAINST SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF 2019 HONG KONG PRO- DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE

Rida Ejaz

Bachelor of Science in International Relations (Gold Medalist)

BUIEMS

Quetta – Pakistan

rida.ejaz143@gmail.com

Manzoor Ahmed

Lecturer

Department of International Relations

BUIEMS

Quetta – Pakistan

manzoor.ahmed@buitms.edu.pk

Abstract

The declaration of the human transmit disease vis-à-vis COVID-19 not only impacted the socio-political structure of the world but also provided a window of opportunity to some governments for overpowering and coercing the people's struggle under the cover of pandemic safety mechanism. As earlier that year there were social movements in almost every corner of the globe demanding their very rights from their respective systems. The novel case of the least studied phenomenon of opportunistic repression could be evident in pseudo democracies specifically in territories as Hong Kong which marked one of the biggest social movements of 2019. Addressing the research gap in the existing literature on opportunistic repression this study aims to provide a conceptual framework to understand the social movement mobilization before and during the pandemic in the case of Hong Kong. Conducting thematic analysis of sampled secondary data, this study provides a comprehensive review of the sources and characteristics of the Hong Kong people's struggle before and during a pandemic. Further this study aims identify tactical adaptations and provide an in-depth insight of opportunistic repression by China in its Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong). As the study is qualitative in nature, it does not aim to provide solution to the problem but rather contribute in the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating that COVID-19 facilitated the process of repression which ended Hong Kong pre-pandemic struggle. The research also provides implications and avenues for further research.



Keywords: COVID-19, social movements, opportunistic repression, Hong Kong

Introduction

For almost the entire world population lives and livelihood changed drastically with the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization on March, 11th 2020. (WHO, 2020) The pandemic is an abstract term used to define a disease that spreads globally from person to person. If one sees the origin of the word, it comes from Greek literature in which pan meaning “all” and demos “the people”. Its novelty was jeopardizing for the entire world population as it was not only unrecognized and easy to transmit but also because of its unprecedented impacts on the socio-political structure of the world. The emergence of Covid-19 pandemic added chaos to the already unstable world. Most of the people suffered not because of the fatality and vulnerability of Covid-19 but also due to the safety mechanisms that were adopted to cope with its spread. As earlier that year, almost half of the world’s population was organized in the form of social movements, demanding their rights from their respective governments. These movements used an array of strategies and tactics to bring changes in structures and values. They gave voice to those people, who lacked the power individually, to stand against the injustices held in the society and structures. Their strong commitment and pace were giving hope that if continued, these movements could have brought greater social changes. But their continuity was halted and decreased with the declaration of Covid-19. The governments used pandemic as a window of opportunity to practice active repression by using public health policies as a cover. (Donald Grasse, 2021).

The Covid-19 safety mechanisms recognized by World Health Organization such as lockdowns and a ban on public gatherings facilitated the process of opportunistic repression in countries where people wanted to change the basic objectives of the system, demanding political reforms and structural changes. Opportunistic repression is a justified form of repression in which increased interference in public affairs is identified as the legal expansion of state authority during a crisis or proclamation of an emergency condition in which a state requires unusually invasive state activity to promote peace and prosperity. As Lockdown measures were necessary in the COVID-19 emergency, some states utilized these measures to repress opposition forces by not only limiting their capability of public protests, but also selectively implemented the safety mechanism in a way that justified their coercive policies. (Barceló, 2022)

After reviewing the recent literature it became eminent to highlight the possible impacts of COVID-19 on pre-pandemic social movements which led the researcher towards the problem that pre-pandemic social movements were halted and decreased by a great extent. The momentum and pressure seemed unable to be restored after Covid-19. To analyze the problem, this study intend to address the question regarding the change in tactics of social movements before and during pandemic. As the limitations of the study do not allow researcher to conduct the research on all pre-Covid-19 social movements in detail, therefore this study takes into account a case study of a



single social movement of Hong Kong pro- democracy movement. To fully understand the impacts of pandemic over social movements, this study covers the case of Hong Kong pro-democratic resistance 2019 and changes in its tactical adaptations before and during pandemic which helps to provide the analytical framework to understand the impacts of pandemic over the social movements in pseudo democracies in general. The intended rationale of choosing Hong Kong as a case study provides a fertile ground for conducting a study to understand the very phenomenon of opportunistic repression. As Pro-democracy movement of Hong Kong marked one of the biggest and technologically advanced movement of the year 2019. Conducting research on this particular case can be helpful in understanding the over all impacts of Covid-19 on social movements more thoroughly. As large amount of literature present on the topic is related to social movements that rose in more democratic states but very little knowledge is available to understand the tactical adaptation of social movements in the case of pseudo democratic or undemocratic states.

In order to achieve the objectives, this study is carried out by using the tools of qualitative research, the selected methodology is based on the paradigm of phenomenology that seeks not to provide statistical data to prove or disapprove something, rather it aims to understand the motives, beliefs and constructions behind people's actions and perception about a phenomenon on universal level(Steven J. Taylor, 2016). Phenomenology would be useful in the sense that it views human behavior in a way to understand what people say and do, as a product of how people define their world, and respond to the social problems. The aim of the research is to capture how people construct their realities (Steven J. Taylor, 2016), under the paradigm this study uses thematic analysis method to yield descriptive interpretation of secondary data. Computer-based tools firstly used to manage large amount of data, and codes were generated in the form of words, phrases, and sometimes sentences by utilizing the open coding method. The initial categories then were further transformed into thematic codes in light of conceptual framework. Second level of coding was also done by using the axial coding method to generate similarities and linkage among the themes. This helped to extract more comprehensive themes and categories. In axial coding this research does not necessarily draw the codes from the utilized theories of the study, as different theories were used to explain the motives of 2019 social movements and each theory could lead toward different objectives. Therefore, conceptual framework is used to guide the process of axial coding that helps to target the specific sub- themes and their inclusion into the main themes. It generates great level of similarities in the studied phenomena. In the process of axial coding some thematic codes related to the other impacts of Covid-19 on the world was also dropped to remain attached restrictively to the objective of the study.

After the coding process the data was interpreted in such a way that it addressed the research problem, its achievement of the objectives towards the Hong Kong people's struggle, change in their tactics as well as their motive to join for greater social change. The significance of the findings from the analysis helped the future readers to grasp the idea about the re-emergence of the movement in near or foreseeable future.



Literature Review and Conceptual framework

COVID-19 restrictive measures targeted people's psychological and socio-economic well-being. In era of globalization. Covid-19 and its restricted measures highlighted the structural inequalities present around the globe. COVID-19 would be remembered for its impact on the healthcare fabric in developed world and for its socio-economic vulnerabilities in less developed countries. COVID-19 impacts are multifaceted as it disrupted essential structures of the world. Besides health, it affected the education, businesses, transportation, tourism etc. and created economic and social complications for almost all the world. However, this study is focused on social movements and its mechanism. Therefore, the impact on the mobilization of the pre- pandemic social movements is essential to understand. Pandemic out broke when there were social movements in many countries around the globe, calling for their rights and civil liberties. In 2019, protests swept across six continents and engulfed both liberal democracies and ruthless autocracies. Throughout the year, movements had emerged overnight, out of nowhere, unleashing public fury on a global scale—from Paris and La Paz to Prague and Port-au-Prince, Beirut to Bogota and Berlin, Catalonia to Cairo, and in Hong Kong, Harare, Santiago, Sydney, Seoul, Quito, Jakarta, Tehran, Algiers, Baghdad, Budapest, London, New Delhi, Manila, and even Moscow. Taken together, the protests reflect unprecedented political mobilization. (Wright, 2019) As Study of each social movement required a deep understanding of issues such as how, when and why movements were organized, How these movements maintained support, formulated strategies, what kind of tactics were used, and how each movement was impacted by the novel COVID-19. To answer all these questions, a broader framework of study is required which cannot be fulfilled in the given limitations. Therefore, this study designed a conceptual framework to conceptualized and specify social movements of 2019.

Participants of each movement were motivated by the grievances and collective will. The participants were organized on ideological, political and economic basis. Each movement had great momentum and had mass public support with greater capability to influence authorities. But these movements needed continuity to bring greater social change. However, the momentum was the product of the past, these tactics and strategies may change but organizing against the oppressor remains the same. (stuggenborg, 2016) To compel the government these movements have used both the disruptive and moderated tactics, they took a wide range of actions (demonstrations, blockade, marches, occupations, civil disobedience, military actions and legal activism) to directly confront their rulers and advance their goals into the national discourse. These movements matter not only for social change but for social control as well. For instance, the social movement in third-world countries contribute not necessarily leading people towards revolution but rather help them by giving the guarantee to the constitutional rights to ensure equality and social justice (Vergara-Camus, 2016) In order to know the success of these movements, it was fundamental for us to outlook for the policy change after the mobilization which should be beneficial for all groups (GIUGINI, 1999) In a sense the Hong Kong 2019 social movement, success was not determined because in between their struggle the pandemic had come



and halted mobilization with closing their democratic protest circle through its restrictive measures, it provided a window of opportunity to HKSAR and PRC to implement a law of repression vis-à-vis national security law. Because HKSAR and PRC Government found inherent motivation to oppress their people amid previous demonstrations and thus see the global pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen their coercive law without incurring the costs of increased international or national pressure. (Barceló, 2022) Using triangulation of the theories of social movements, the study provided academic and philosophical bases to qualitative research because 'in the study of social movements, few scholars have aimed to build universal theories that attempt to make general statements about movements across time and place.' (Staggenborg, 2016).

As mentioned, the conceptual framework is based on various theories. Relative deprivation theory was used first to explain and distinguish the 2019 social movements. This theory explains that people relativity occurs when their expectations does not match the rate of improvement. Beyond the fundamentals, the argument of relative deprivation theory is that subjective perceptions of inequality, not just inequality, also drives movement emergence. To organize, people must acknowledge that there is inequality and they are unfairly held on the wrong end of the inequality distribution (Berberoglu, 2019) Social movements under this theory are distinguished in two forms, one is norm oriented that promote norms which is more common than those that promote values or values oriented. Movements that attempt to bring changes within the system are norm-oriented movements, those which attempt to change the whole basic goal of system or trying to make a new system out of the existing system with new policies are value- oriented movements (2011). Many of the 2019 social movements organized because of the feeling of deprivation either from the state or from the system as a whole. Some movements were norms oriented while others were value oriented, some of the movements were successful in their struggle to bring change into their existing systems while others were not. For instance, the protest that sparked in numerous places around Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, were movements that were norm oriented. From protest against the ruling elite for rigging elections in La Paz to protest in Cairo for better policies, to demonstrations in Hong Kong to have political opportunity by universal suffrage, some movements were value oriented. These movements' success was not certain because they needed continuity in their struggle. The 2019 value oriented movements in order to achieve their goals needed the same pace for longer period of time but their continuity declined with the outbreak of Covid-19. As in control of the pandemic, states implemented lockdowns and quarantine policies in a way that it halted not only the people's mobility but also breaks the regular protest structures. For months, the media focused on death rather than life. The selective implementation of the restrictive Covid-19 measures indicated the case of opportunistic repression in the case of some less-democratic and undemocratic political units. Despite of the activism, movements tried to show, they faced scrutiny because they were demanding social change. A very little understanding is present in the existing body of knowledge regarding Covid-19 and opportunistic repression against value oriented social movements.

Recent studies show that such repressions were evident in countries of west Africa like Uganda,



Guinea, where people were demanding constitutional reforms. But little or no research has been conducted in the case of Hong Kong which marked one of the biggest pro-democratic struggle with around 2 million people on the streets. Recognizing the research gap, this study provides a comprehensive review of the sources and characteristics of the Hong Kong 2019 pro-democratic struggle, that helped to provide a deep insight to opportunistic repression by People Republic of China in their Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong. As the movement's character was technologically advanced and leaderless and it could be continued even during Covid-19 with embracing horizontalism but PRC used Covid-19 to selectively implement the policies of repression. Covid-19 restrictive measures facilitated the process of opportunistic repression because movement's unique, leaderless character did not allowed PRC to use political violence in an effective way. It rejected the idea of centralized leadership that guided and maintained support in any social movement, but this did not mean that they were entirely without leading characters—under leaderless movement anyone can be a “leader” by volunteering for a task that is important and temporary. (Earl, 2007) Participants in movement embraced a horizontal organizing philosophy characterized by the absence of stable leaders and the replacement of self-governing cooperation (Neil S utherland, 2014). Participants actually developed on-site services such as legal assistance, food, libraries, medical aid, education, and Wi-Fi through self-directed and spontaneous ownership of tasks (Sitrin, 2011). Therefore, it became difficult for the China to halt them with political violence, but after the emergence of Covid-19 China not only selectively implemented the safety mechanisms but also enacted the national security law which put an end to their democratic struggle. In control during the pandemic, state implemented ban on public gatherings and quarantine policies one by one. As a result, mobility came to an abrupt halt, but regular life continued. The selective implementation of the Covid-19 safety policies was the evidence of the phenomena of opportunistic repression in Hong Kong. If Covid-19 hadn't happened China could not move and act towards the national security law. This study provides indications that Covid-19 did not trigger rather facilitated the process of this act of opportunistic repression, by enacting the National Security Act.

As this act was deemed necessary for PRC to tighten the control over HKSAR. The social movement was triggered by the Anti-ELAB bill, but was a result of past grievances and hatred for mainland, China. The protest initiated in the month of February 2019, when the Government of the SAR and P.R.C. announced the introduction of the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019. The bill allows the Chief Executive to transfer wanted criminals on a basis of individual cases to mainland China, that does not have formal extradition agreements with Hong Kong. (Kasuya, 2021) Using a sensational murder case in Taiwan in which the accused came in Hong Kong, the HKSAR Government had claimed that it is necessary to close a legal loophole because there's no extradition agreement with Taiwan. Instead of focusing on the extradition agreement with Taiwan, the Extradition Bill was proposed, which allowed Hong Kong people to be extradited to the China. (Chan, 2022) Having the vast difference in legal systems of China and Hong Kong. This proposed bill represented unlawful act by the PRC because law enacted prior to the July 1997 handover did not allow



extradition to China. The Bill therefore, elicited a strong reaction in Hong Kong, with many residents believing that if the bill had passed, it would have allowed China to extradite dissidents for political trials (Kasuya, 2021). The movement was a greater mobilization after 2014 umbrella movement that didn't achieve its goal, the participants gradually started to demand universal suffrage to have a political opportunity in the system to better articulate better policies for the public away from Chinese autocracies. (Holbig, 2020) Under another theory of social movements, the political opportunity theory; the demands of the movement could be better understood as political opportunity theory emphasizes that people participate in social movement politics because they lack access to government institutions and inner workings; they lack the political opportunities afforded to the wealthy and well-connected, they lack the opportunity to participate in decision making and therefore, they must seek change through non-institutional means—for example, through a social movement. The participants under this movement, were demanding for the same political opportunity for the people of Hong Kong. So that they could have effective say in the controlled decision making process. They have the capability to bring strong social change if continued but when their resistance finally started to getting shape, Covid-19 came and declined their mobility.

The comprehensive review of the sources and characteristics before and during pandemic made it evident that movement could be continued even during Covid-19 without violating the restrictive measures but China under the cover of Covid-19 safety mechanism quickly implemented NSL which closed the protest windows permanently. For, articulation of the sources and characteristics, another theoretical lens was used from the field of sociology that is resource mobilization theory. This theory explains that social movements require resources for collective action because strain and grievances can be found anywhere but until masses do not have resources to mobilize, collective action cannot occur. These resources include both tangible and intangible assets, they are essential for the formation and sustainability of social movements. In this sense, "resources" can refer to a variety of sources, with people (activists, leaders) to economic (connections, monetary assistance, etc.) to network. Under the lens, the tangible sources of the Hong Kong movement were the people and intangible was the internet driven social media tools. The activist and participants were self-mobilized without the command of any prominent leader; they discussed everything online using different social media tools and resorted towards actions offline on the streets. The Internet was their valuable resource for social mobilization, while also decreasing the cost of mobilization and participation. Under the theory, some scholars even argued that the Internet has become a "social movement organizational substitute. (Lee F. L., 2015) . Given Hong Kong the status of global media hub, collective action efforts have made frequent use of the media to gain global attention and legitimacy. Hong Kong's social media platforms have evolved from being one-time tools for individual protest events to be in critical components of "self-mobilization processes" in which protest groups inspire new debate in public discourse.

Findings



The measures implemented in responding to the coronavirus pandemic are unprecedented state interventions into people lives. States around world have tried to prevent the spread of covid-19 by closing schools and businesses, restricting public gatherings. These initiatives also enable authorized state's intervention in the lives of civilians.(Donald Grasse, 2021) Some states, particularly in the early days of the pandemic, were harsh in enforcing coronavirus-related restrictions. Political leaders took advantage of the pandemic to suppress opposition and consolidated power. These leaders used the emergency powers which were granted to them during the crisis to stifle criticism and popular mobilisation. The unusual situation of crisis provided them the cover to consolidate power, which made contribution in democratic backsliding (Kishi D. R., 2021) The coronavirus pandemic provided governments, the window of opportunity to actively repressed using lawful public health policies as cover (Donald Grasse, 2021) The pandemic has bolstered the positions of states throughout West Africa. Governments have used the crisis to stifle opposition and manipulate elections. In Guinea, where there had been large-scale protests against proposed constitutional changes since October 2019, the health crisis enabled the regime to push the changes by diverting international attention towards disease outbreak. Meanwhile, the regime consolidated the power quickly by arresting the participants, activists and leaders, it also enabled them to elect and install new parliament. In Venezuela, de facto President Nicolas Maduro declared lockdowns in the initial periods of the pandemic, limiting ongoing anti-government protests in late March. The repeated postponed elections in Bolivia during the pandemic sparked unrest across the country in summer, with critiques claiming that the government is postponing the elections to retain power. President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi also consolidated his power in response to the disease outbreak to suppress the rising threat of the Islamic State in Sinai. In late April, he strengthened his position by ratifying new amendments to the country's emergency law, authorizing himself additional broad powers that permitted him to ban or limit public gatherings even in the absence of a health emergency. While the government claimed that the measures were intended to combat the global epidemic, the major part of the legislative changes are not clearly related to public health concerns.

Same situation occurred in Hong Kong where demonstrations were at its peak during 2019 but later halted with Covid-19 outbreak. Hong Kong movement was considered one of the highly tech advanced movement of the year 2019 with utilizing online platforms as an alternative of social movement organization and resorting online discussed tactics on the streets. Hong Kong social movement with around 2 million population, demanded universal suffrage under authoritarian regime and the movement was successful in maintaining the street protests in a way that did not allow the government to suppress the people or to use political violence against them.

Hong Kong social movement that faced suppression for their continued struggle of democracy was gaining momentum before Covid-19. Despite of police violence, people organized biggest protest movements in the history of Hong Kong. They were successful in compelling government to withdraw from the extradition bill, which means that they could have been successful in their prolonged demand of universal suffrage, if continued with same pace for longer period. Their



movement was well organized and leaderless, every individual that participated in the street protest completed their responsibility for tasks they were assigned online. Their leaderless character emerged from the past 2014 failed movement. (Lee F. L., 2018) Their main social media platforms were their strength against the government, even in the absence of charismatic leaders, participants form communes by utilising networking tools like Facebook and Telegram, or by utilising a shared community space like LIHKG which demonstrated the advantages of pooling people's collective intelligence. The self – mobilization of the citizens was aided by effective use of these platforms. For instance, the social media live streaming events which were demonstrated on Facebook by the Apple daily news channel stimulated the viewers' emotions, the live video material frequently exciting and dramatic altercations, violent incidents, and fights helped to gather mass public support. For demonstrations' organizational structure, the LIHKG website was well renowned. Being one of the key venues for debating the tactics for the unorganized protests against the extradition bill in 2019, it was proved user friendly. Users on LIHKG posted a wide range of political discussion topics, such as proposed changes, updates on rally allowances, news, perspectives, and inside information about companies and other organizations. LIHKG's up-vote and down-vote functions assisted in estimating the prominence of various proposals through poll formation. With the capability to post status on LIHKG, movement participants proposed a wide range of activities. Using LIHKG voting, organizers were able to determine which thoughts, feelings and ideas were popular or compelling, and which were not. This approach to voting differs from the way of centralized movements and in this, organizers carefully craft collective changes in their texts and activities. While the Telegram on the other hand was considered secure, the participants were gradually updating details about possible vulnerabilities on this platform. This is the most distinctive aspects of the protest movement, its diversity and expertise in visual imagery made the resistance effective and made people resilient against police violence. In response to police violence that directly confronted the mobs on the street, the participants quickly dispersed into residential areas to either dispersed or seek shelter in different venues whose codes and key information were shared on telegram. Furthermore, the indiscriminate police violence also increased the movement support, as the citizens joined movement struggle when witnessed violence against their own people.

On the surface with the outbreak of Covid-19 the protest mobilization interrupted. It is important to note that unlike many countries Hong Kong was combatting the Covid-19 very efficiently, the first case of Covid-19 was reported on 23rd January 2020, due to its unknown nature and the previous SARS experience, the public responded efficiently. The confirmed cases amounted to just 130 by 11 March, but still from January the police violence on mobs increased drastically. With a strong public awareness and few cases, the Hong Kong did not require a harsh government response to the pandemic. But still Government seemed to be using the Covid-19 as an opportunity to repress. Opportunistic repression is the repression induced by states as justified act of adherence to international norms and thus it add up to their power. The restrictive measures of Covid-19 recognized by WHO were becoming a norm in the start of 2020, compelling all nations to impose lockdown, ban public gatherings, close international travel, and ban public transport. However,



such norms required the governments to respond in accordance with their country's situation. The cases, as per Covid-19 disorder tracker, were low in number in Hong Kong compare to other countries and regions. The highest score recorded was 71 in Hong Kong, 85 in Singapore and 82 in South Korea out of an average of 1000. But despite of less Covid-19 cases, the Hong Kong and PRC government used its restrictive safety mechanisms as an opportunity to repress the masses. The selective implementation of the safety measures made the case of opportunistic repression evident in Hong Kong.

As shown in the table below:

S/No	COVID-19 Shutdowns & Restriction Policies	Applicable Yes/No
1.	Ban on public gatherings	Yes
2.	Ban on International travel	No
3.	Closing educational institutes	Yes
4.	Cancelling public events	Yes
5.	Ban on public transport	No
6.	Stay at home policy	No

Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGR)

The government selectively implemented the safety measures to ensured that the uprisings of the previous year could not further escalate. They banned only public gatherings for the control of virus but no ban was put on public transport which was used by thousands of people and could play a major role in spreading virus. Moreover, stay at home requirement was not made compulsory by government, just to allow the easy follow of businesses. No restriction was made on international travel even with known fact that Covid-19 started from their neighboring country China. Only public events were cancelled with also closing of educational institutions as these institutes were becoming a physical space for organizing students to support the movement. Even till mid of march the government did not close the border with China, from where the virus was spreading, which means that combatting Covid-19 was of secondary interest but the major interest of government was to repress the struggle of the movement. And Covid-19 safety mechanisms provided the window of opportunity to the state machinery for opportunistic repression. Hong Kong officials had arrested influential pro-democratic figures of politics, civil society, and the media, waging a broad crackdown on the protests that wracked the city earlier for igniting a protest amid Covid-19 restrictions.

But as no ban was made on online social media tools, or restaurants and shopping malls that provided the movement with new tools for expression within everyday life. Since the announcement of pandemic, the participation of the people in protests dropped in number, but still from January



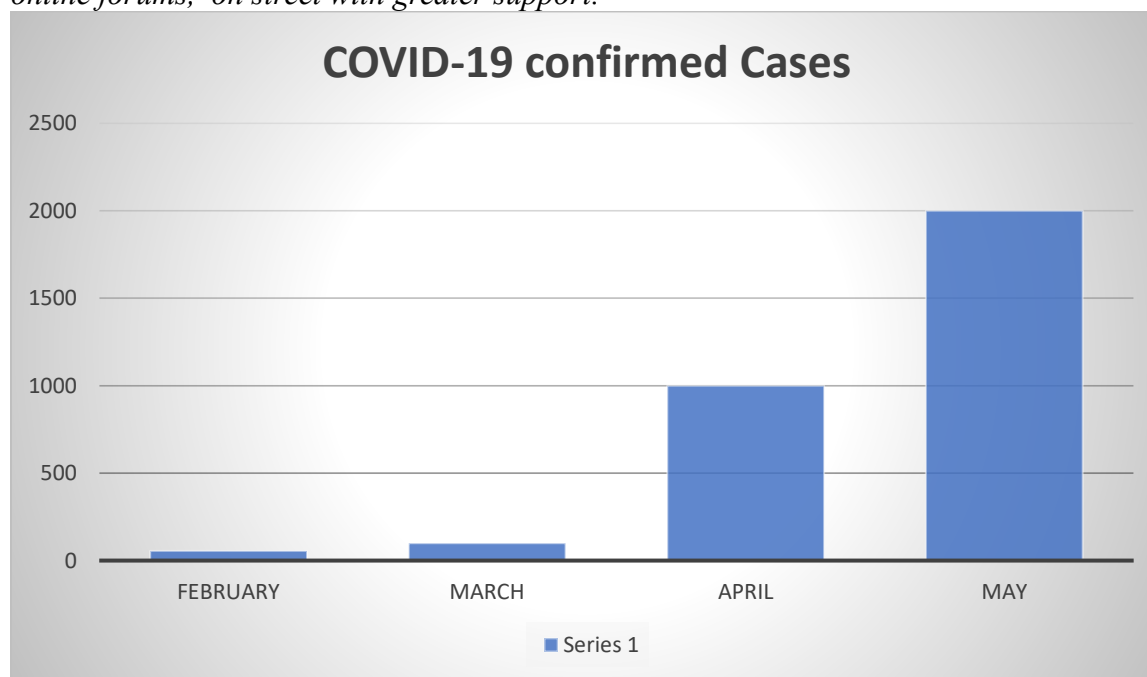
to April 2020 people organized in sporadic gatherings in which protesters staged sit-ins during the lunch break or gathered in shopping malls to chant slogans together. This indicated that though social movement had lost its momentum but not deep grievances of social change (Chenoweth, 2020), protestors were active and amidst the social distancing rules, they interplayed between the digital and material tools and made a protest space even more significant. They shared the emotionally charged footages of key protest incidents of 2019, which continued to be circulated widely through digital technologies using social media platforms. These platforms helped in contesting their narratives and framing their discontent even during Covid-19.

This continuation was a real threat to HKSAR and PRC government. Therefore, in order to end the movement's struggle, it was deemed necessary to shut down the online platforms as well. The HKSAR and PRC moved towards institutional repression which is softer repression with having long term gains that directly outlawed the democratic struggle for longer period of time. Beijing clearly saw the SAR government's failure to meet the difficult task of dealing with the protests on its own and it also saw the demonstrations as a direct challenge to its own authority. The PRC government has enacted the national security law in the month of July, the law not only stipulates various actions taken by protesters during the Anti-ELAB Movement as national security infringements under the offences of terrorism, subversion, separatism, and collusion with foreign forces, with life imprisonment as the maximum penalty but also authorized the creation of the centrally directed Office for Safeguarding National Security. Commanding a wide range of powers in law enforcement and adjudication. Specific provisions in the NSL jeopardized free internet access, particularly for portals or subject matter critical of the government. Due to which all the platforms that participants were using, were either shutdown or put under surveillance by government. The monitoring helped the government to arrest those people who were chanting pro-democratic ideas on the internet. PRC was well aware from the fact that movement gathered support and sustained momentum due to these forums. Four of the first five cases brought under the NSL and twenty-two of the first one hundred and five NSL arrests were related to the so-called subversive or separatist rhetoric or the procurement of critics' speeches online. Twelve of these included pure hatred speech charges in which no other claimed offences were made, such as shouting and displaying pro-independence slogans. The NSL's retroactive character was also highlighted by the closure of Apple Daily. Social media accounts were shut down as a result of an unplanned police operation that resulted in the arrest and detention of its editor in chief, other members of the editorial staff, and executives at the parent company Next Digital. The overwhelming majority of material removal has taken place through self-censorship as well, because everyone feared detention while security personnel have utilized their power to order the removal of internet content which resulted in attacks on unbiased and pro-democracy media.

Covid-19 may not have triggered but facilitated the enactment of NSL. Under the ban on public gatherings the government shut down three protest windows. Two of these windows were the annual protest features in Hong Kong: The June 4th vigil to remember the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre and the July 1st march to commemorate China's takeover of Hong Kong. The



third window was closed by the National People's Congress and its Standing Committee, by enacting the NSL in June without consulting the people of Hong Kong. Despite of the ban people came on the streets, the police allegedly arrested many activists for violating the Covid-19 restrictive measures. The ban on public gathering facilitated the process of national security law. The Covid-19 also facilitated in a way that during the month of May the cases of fatalities were increasing due to which the public was in great fear of the health risks. It is important to know that in the year 2019 the Hong Kong pro-democracy resistance met with greater support by the citizens of residential areas. Indiscriminate police violence led them to join the resistance towards social change. During Covid-19 when NSL was enacted only small group of people from pro-democracy camp tried to demonstrate against it by coming on the streets in the same month of May but they met with police suppression and were detained. So, if Covid-19 was not present such an enactment could have been met with large scale demonstrations, with people already organized through online forums, on street with greater support.



Conclusion, Contribution and implication for further research

The research was conducted to particularly understand the states' use of Covid-19 for the purpose to consolidate power. With the case study of Hong Kong, this study reached on the conclusion that Covid-19 facilitated the PRC repression in HKSAR. By utilizing different tools of qualitative research this study aimed to provide some social and political implications. This study was not aimed to find solutions rather intended to address the problem. The research tried to find the qualitative answers to the research questions. The analysis of secondary data provided the themes



that undoubtedly indicated the signs of opportunistic repression in the case of Hong Kong and PRC. This study discovered that in case of Hong Kong, opportunistic repression played a major role in ending the pro-democracy movement of 2019. Critically, the analysis further showed that the lockdown policies were basically introduced for public safety but these policies were also used as a tool by some regimes to repress the opposition under guise of lockdown.

As the Covid-19 emergency required all states to impose some kind of restrictions on the public gathering, many states, not only in the case of PRC and HKSAR used it as an opportunity to silent the previous ongoing social movements during that timescale. It does not mean that the government imposed the lockdown to primarily halt the movement and sabotage its structure, as the infectious virus needed the quick response with policies enactment that could prevent the spread of Covid-19. But once such policies started getting shape, it helped some of the governments, mostly pseudo or undemocratic governments, to license repression. Under these assumptions, this study analyzed the change in tactical adaptations before and during pandemic by the HONG KONG pro-democratic resistance participants, with the aim to understand the correlation between Covid-19 and repression. Our objectives were to provide a comprehensive review of the tactics change. The analytical result reveled that PRC used Covid-19 related restrictions not only to silence the movement through physical obstruction but also to end their democratic struggle through institutional repression. The Anti-ELAB movement, leaderless and organized without any social movement organization, was biggest and sustained movement, the self-mobilization of the citizens using social media popular platforms, the telegram for end-to-end encrypted messages, the use of LIHKG social media channel for public authentic polls, and the secret group chats of WhatsApp enabled them not only to gather mass support but also to avoid police violence and government suppression. Their extended demands towards democracy threatened the reign of PRC in HKSAR. Due to their online gatherings, it was difficult for the PRC to control and silence them. The Covid-19 outbreak worldwide, not only provided china an opportunity to suppress but also repress the very mechanism of the movement. In the initial months of 2020, the Covid-19 cases in HONG KONG were considerably less which did not require strong safety mechanisms. The selective implementation of the restrictive measures disrupted their movement's momentum. This selective implementation still wasn't able to decrease their expression of grievances online. Therefore, China in order to hold power for longer period, enacted the national security law in May 2020 to end their democratic struggle. This study claims that the Covid-19 might not have triggered the enactment but rather it facilitated the process. It provided an opportunity to China to quickly make the bill of NSL and transform it into law. Covid-19 restrictive measures were used to silence the protests against the enactment of National Security Law. Under its four main provisions, the law criminalized offences under succession, subversion, terrorism, and colluding with foreign government, and carried high risk of detainment. After the enactment of the NSL, the activists raced to delete all their post made on different social media sites, the restaurants that had built the Lennon wall quickly tore down the yellow notes on which pro-democratic messages were written, because all knew that under subversion and succession they could be charged and imprisoned. Even the next day when protests from some pro-democratic



figures were arranged faced high level of despotism, as they raised the flags of Hong Kong's independence, protesters were arrested and were charged with life imprisonment. During the month of enactment, Covid-19 cases in Hong Kong were increasing which threatened the lives of people. It is evident from the analysis that during 2019 demonstrations the activists had mass support from citizens who joined them on street and facilitated the peaceful and less violent protests. If public gatherings were not banned in Hong Kong the enactment of NSL could have faced more opposition than extradition bill.

Moving away from the main case study, opportunistic repression could also be witnessed in other value-oriented movements as well due to Covid-19. The momentum of such movements declined, state quickly enacted policies that tightened their grip on power. Although united nation announced that toxic lockdown culture must not be implemented by state over civilians which are unarmed and peaceful who are following the social distancing measures precisely. The guidelines were introduced in April 2020 but before that many states had already enacted and arranged the necessary policies to suppress their oppositions. The repression case was evident in Egypt where president in response to 2019 social movement that demanded democracy, quickly under Covid-19 relief program made an amendment into the constitution that consolidated his power and permitted him to ban public gathering even during non-emergency situation. This amendment was made in 1958 emergency law, under the said amendment state authorities bared that Covid-19 had revealed a gap in their existing law, therefore, it was needed to be addressed. However only five out of eighteen proposed provisions were related to public health and remaining were abusive in context. The Egyptian government took the precautionary measures of Covid-19 even before its declaration by the WHO. They were already prohibiting the public gatherings to repress their citizens' mobility to not allow them to demonstrate further. It is important to know that Egypt was harsh in implementation of the Covid-19 relief program, the amendment into the constitution and implementation of the newly enacted laws probably ended the democratic struggle in Egypt. The opportunistic repression played a major role because the country was already facing the long held curfew by armed forces. The president under the 2014 constitution was allowed to declared state of emergency for period of three months only, but, since 2017 terrorist attack it was still continued until Covid-19 surfaced. The data analysis indicated that Egypt was already repressing the uprising of 2019 with political violence, but political violence did not prove successful to halt movement's momentum. However the Covid-19 outbreak provided an opportunity to government to ban and repressed them permanently.

A detailed study of Covid-19 and opportunistic repression against Egypt social movement is required, which could be guided by this study. This research further provides guidance for the future researchers about impact of Covid-19 on Egypt social movement as Hong Kong and Egyptian struggles were similar in many contexts. Both the movements were demanding their political rights of free and fair elections to move the country towards democratic system, both the movements were mobilizing against governments' unlawful policies or bills, and both were not able to restrict and suppress these movements by using political violence alone. Further, the



researchers can study the tactical adaptations of Egypt social movement before and during pandemic in the same way this research has studied the case of Hong Kong. This study also provides the research gaps to study the concept of re-emergence of such movements after the end of Covid-19. The study encourages the further research towards the practical implications of NSL and social movement's organization in Hong Kong from year onward 2020 as the Covid-19 cases have already declined and Covid-19 after the due processes of vaccination does not seem to be fetal but the momentum of pre-pandemic social movements does not seem to be restored with same pace.



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