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Hong Kong slowly bleeding to death



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Disclosures by released bookseller Lam Wing-kee of his treatment in mainland China and the resultant outcry have spurred Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying to ask for a review into the notification mechanism between the police forces of Hong Kong and the mainland. But the most serious allegation of Chinese misconduct isn't even on the agenda: the illegal abduction of Hong Kong residents by mainland agents, both in Hong Kong and in Thailand.

In large part because of Lam's revelations, Leung wrote to inform the central government of deep-seated concerns in Hong Kong over the case of the five booksellers — Lam and four associates — and to ask for a review.

Currently, the agreement covers only Guangdong province, adjoining Hong Kong, and Leung is asking for it to include all Chinese provinces. He wants Hong Kong to be informed if any of its residents are arrested, just as is the case for foreign governments. While this is certainly

a step in the right direction, it steers clear of the sensitive issue of extralegal activities by the mainland.

Leung was appointed by Beijing so it isn't surprising that he treads gingerly in sensitive areas. But he is doing Beijing no favors by not openly addressing the issue of its interference in Hong Kong's internal affairs.

China Badly Burned

Mainland China has already been badly burned by the booksellers' saga. It has been excoriated by governments around the world. If Beijing wants to salvage a tiny bit of international credibility, it needs to make it crystal clear that it respects the law — Hong Kong's Basic Law, enacted by China's National People's Congress, and international law — and explain how its agents went so far as to exercise law enforcement functions in Hong Kong and foreign countries.

The disappearance of bookseller Lee Bo from Hong Kong in December was almost certainly the result of abduction by mainland agents. "Mr. Lee was involuntarily removed to the mainland without any due process," the British govern-

ment concluded in February in a report on Hong Kong. Another bookseller, Gui Minhui, a Swedish national, disappeared last October while in Thailand and showed up in China without having gone through Thai immigration formalities. He is still incarcerated on the mainland.

Where Hong Kong is concerned, confidence in "one country, two systems" will continue to plummet and those able to do so will emigrate, leaving the territory to bleed slowly to death. "One country, two systems" will be seen as nothing but a cruel joke.

Even if these actions were not planned at the highest levels in mainland China but were the work of rogue officials, by this time, the mainland authorities are certainly well aware of it. Interval investigations must have been carried out and whoever was responsible must have been identified.

Initially, there were people who thought these illegal actions were the work of local officials in Guangdong. But the mere fact that Lam was taken by train to Ningbo, Zhejiang province, and held there makes it clear that it was not the work of officials in one province and that whoever planned it was at a senior level. Friends of the Chinese Communist Party have soothingly said that this was but an isolated incident and that it did not bespeak a change in policy. However, this so-called incident is reminiscent of the Watergate scandal of 1972, in which burglars broke into the office of the Democratic National Committee in Washington, D.C.

While then-President Richard Nixon may not have authorized the operation or even known about it in advance, he took part in the subsequent cover-up. For this, he faced impeachment and became the first president in American history to resign. Similarly, the top Chinese leadership may not have planned or authorized the Lee Bo or Gui Minhui kidnappings, but certainly by now the entire Politburo should have been briefed and know the details inside out.

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