

DIRTY AIR THE 'DIRTY LAUNDRY' IN HONG KONG ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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HONOLULU (March 23) – The environment is often an election issue in Western countries, especially in Europe. But to think of it as a major factor in Asian balloting is almost like believing in fairy tales. But, according to East-West Center senior fellow and environmental economist ZhongXiang Zhang, Mother Goose and the Brother's Grimm may be alive and well in Hong Kong.

“The deteriorating air quality,” Zhang points out, “has become one of the most contentious issues in Sunday’s upcoming vote for Hong Kong’s chief executive,” the person who will be the head of government in the affluent Chinese special autonomous region. Zhang says that the quality of the air is not the issue as much as who is to blame for its poor quality. “The Beijing-backed incumbent Donald Tsang says Mainland China is spreading air pollutants,” Zhang notes. “But his pro-democracy challenger Alan Leong contends that the territory’s poor air quality is mainly caused locally, criticizing Tsang for not doing enough to pass a local environmental act during his term in office.”

Criticizing China politically in Hong Kong has been a delicate balancing act over the past ten years since the former British Crown Colony reverted back to Mainland rule. But, Zhang says, “Air pollution is a safer political issue for both sides.” That is because “Beijing may be more comfortable with air quality as an election issue, even coming from its own candidate,” Zhang points out, “rather than dealing with demands for what it sees as unacceptable political goals in the territory such as democracy.”

The pollution issue does resonate with many in Hong Kong.

“The general public and business communities in Hong Kong have been voicing increasing concern over the local environment,” Zhang says. He adds, “Many fear the worsening air quality will cost them both in terms of health and money.” Two concerns that cross political lines with impunity in Hong Kong. “Business leaders are worried that if the situation does not improve, Hong Kong’s standing as a top-tier financial and services center will be badly tarnished.”

Air quality as an election issue may play well with Hong Kong voters, but how it will be seen long-term in Beijing is another matter. Zhang says “it is not easy for a country to accept responsibility for specific environmental problems in another country or area.” He points to the acid rain debates in Europe of the 1970s and '80s. “It took great effort and a long time for Scandinavian countries to get the United Kingdom and continental European states to accept responsibility for long-range transboundary pollutants acidifying Scandinavian lakes and streams.”

China is no exception when it comes to being reluctant to accept responsibility for environmental problems elsewhere that may be traced back to its doorstep. And, Zhang notes the Beijing-backed incumbent in Hong Kong is not raising an issue that is new to China. “Particles from Chinese coal-fired power plants are said to be a cause of the poorer air quality in countries such as Japan and Korea,” although no official complaints have been levied due to political considerations.

But whatever the source, or the placement of the political blame, both candidates for the top job in Hong Kong agree that the deteriorating air quality is a problem, one that must be solved. Casting or fixing the blame, however, will not be easy nor enough. Zhang notes, “There have been no authoritative studies indicating the primary source of the air pollution, local or cross-border.”

The East-West Center senior fellow believes that no matter what the outcome of Sunday’s election Hong Kong should take urgent action both for the health of its people and for its international standing. “Hong Kong authorities should move quickly to reduce emissions from local vehicles, marine traffic and power plants,” he notes, “while, at the same time, establish agreements with its neighboring heavily-industrialized Chinese province of Guangdong to undertake a joint study to locate the source of emissions and take concerted efforts to remedy the situation.” To focus only on one or the other, the local or the cross-border pollution sources, he says “will be less effective than acting on both together.”

No matter the outcome of Sunday’s balloting, Zhang believes “Hong Kong can clear the air” with quick and proper action. And, “Hong Kong may also be able to breathe some life into those fairy tales.”

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