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HK preserving civil rights that are eroded in the West

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By N. Balakrishnan (HK Edition)

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When I see so many people clamoring for "democracy" in Hong Kong now, I often wonder whether they know about the severe modifications "democracy" has undergone in the past decade or so in the United States and the United Kingdom. To me, Hong Kong, which lacks universal franchise but is on the way to get it soon, already has many civil rights that are being eroded in the advanced democracies.

There was a time not too long ago when the US believed in an individual's right to privacy and the UK believed in granting civil responsibilities and rights to its citizens.

In the late 1970s when I was a student in New York and trying to apply for a driver's license, I took along some photographs as one does in most Asian countries where I had lived before going to the US to study. I was astounded to find the officer in the license office saying that they don't require photographs in drivers licenses because that would be an invasion of privacy! I was not even a US citizen and had been in the US only for studies and this respect for privacy impressed me a lot.

That was then. Now as we all know the US government defends its right to monitor all phone calls of foreigners and wants to know what books Americans borrow from their libraries.

After the US I spent a year in London as a student and lived in a student hostel for about a year. I was again astounded to receive in the mail a ballot slip for voting in the London City Council elections.

Upon enquiring I was told the London City government took the position that all those who lived within the boundaries of London had the right to elect its representatives. So in spite of being a foreigner and just a student I had the right to vote in the City Council elections.



**N. Balakrishnan**

The UK was in an economic crisis when I was there in 1976, but in spite of that I was given a National Health Service card which included even some dental privileges. I told my professor about how impressed I was about this and he told me that sailors from the then Soviet Union often used their shore leave to get their health problems attended to for free.

That was then. A couple of years ago, I went to apply for a UK visa and the form asked for my grandfather's birth date! No, I am not making this up, it did indeed ask for the birth date of my grandfather whom I have never met. After filling up the form I was asked to make a fingerprint of all 10 fingers. Gone is the civilized welcome for foreign

ers. However, my friends who have applied for visas recently told me that there are so many minor concessions recently and the visa form says that if we cannot remember the correct birth date of our grandfather, we can just fill it as 1900

- a typical pragmatic British solution.

At least from appearances, London seems to be filled with more CCTV cameras than any Chinese city I have seen.

Hong Kong's Immigration Department, in contrast, seems to have devised a system which allows them to grant visas for most nationalities on arrival in Hong Kong, without subjecting the visitors to what amounts to a criminal investigation, before stamping your passport.

In spite of the usual Western claptrap about how the Chinese lack a sense of privacy, the Privacy Commissioner of Hong Kong is so diligent that he even fines government-controlled companies for infractions.

In spite of all the undemocratic changes the US and the UK have made domestically they seem to have no reflection about whether they may be hypocritical to cheer on "democracy" in Hong Kong while paring it away at home.

This is not to say that Hong Kong people should not aspire to or fight for democracy. After all a doctor who himself smokes, but tells you not to smoke is not necessarily wrong, but such a doctor surely lacks credibility.

It is not uncommon for students to overtake their teachers or "borrowers" to retain some of the best elements

of a borrowed culture while the original "lender" culture has either forgotten or even destroyed its best elements. I can think of Japan which seems to have retained many elements of China in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) which seem to have disappeared in China or Bali retaining elements of Hindu culture which have disappeared in India. Maybe it may be left for Hong Kong to retain elements of the classical US and UK democratic culture which seem to be on the verge of disappearing in the home of the Magna Carta and in the Land of the Free.

When I see commentators from the US and UK pointing the finger at the lack of democracy in Hong Kong, I am reminded of the saying:

"When a man points a finger at someone else, he should remember that four of his fingers are pointing at himself."

The author has been living and working in Hong Kong for the past two decades and spent his earlier years writing for various leading publications in Asia. He is currently th



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e CEO of acompany listed in the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.  
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