**SCMP Article**

**Harmony or discord? It’s up to young voters**

On Sunday, Hong Kong will elect a new Legislative Council. It will not be just a new term for our lawmaking assembly – it will reflect a new era in Hong Kong politics. Some veterans from both the pro-government and opposition camps are leaving the scene. They are familiar faces, with long experience. We will probably look back on them as moderate compared with some of the younger generation. I was a legislator from 1998 to 2008, and it is clear to me that there is a very different mood today.

When Zhang Dejiang (張德江) of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee visited Hong Kong in May, he reached out to some pro-democrats. He had met them before. I remember when all lawmakers went to Guangzhou in 2005, and Zhang was party secretary of Guangdong. He was fairly formal with them at that time. Last May, he was very open. At a reception, he talked with a few veteran pan-democrats, two of whom are giving way to younger colleagues at this election. They told him bluntly that they thought Leung Chung-ying (who was also present) should not stay in office as chief executive. He heard them out.

He and Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office director Wang Guangya (王光亞) both remarked during that time that the pro-democrats had a role to play under the “one country, two systems” principle.

There is obviously a shift here. When the pan-democrats at the reception mentioned that they did not have home return permits – so they could not visit the mainland – Zhang replied that he would look into it. I wonder, however, if they are rather nervous that they might actually get the permits, and thus might appear to be getting friendlier with Beijing.

The background to this is the rise of a new generation of far more radical political activists and groupings, and the need for pro-government parties to win over younger voters. The young so-called “localists” did not just appear out of nowhere as soon as the Occupy protests ended. Anyone following local heritage, environmental and similar issues over the past decade has noticed young people becoming far more aware and involved. The national education controversy in 2012 turned students into activists and even public figures. The influx of mainland mothers and shoppers created a backlash among mostly young protesters claiming to be defending local interests. Even the use of simplified Chinese characters on restaurant menus attracts criticism.

Some commentators suggest that big long-term problems like housing costs and declining economic opportunities have created a more militant younger generation. These issues have helped create dissatisfaction, but the localists themselves do not seem to mention them much. A recent article in The Economist sees Hong Kong identity – and perceived threats to it – as the key issue. This seems right.

Meanwhile, the pro-government camp is undergoing its own changes. The mainstream pro-Beijing groups are pushing their own younger generation of politicians. These groups traditionally rely on community work to raise their profile. This requires a lot of effort, but it has brought steady success in the polls over the years. The challenge for these candidates is to reach out to a wider range of voters – people who are younger and more middle class. Interestingly, several of these candidates are declaring themselves to be “localist” and patriotic to the nation.

The more centrist pro-establishment parties already focus on middle-class, business and professional voters. They succeed on the strength of their leaders’ personalities, but with so much competition from elsewhere on the spectrum, they may find it difficult to attract younger supporters.

It may be that Sunday’s election does not make much difference in the balance of Legco seats between broad pro-government and opposition camps. But the underlying voting patterns will be crucial – especially where the younger voters are concerned. Are younger opposition supporters abandoning the old pan-democratic parties for radical localists? Can the pro-government camp attract the younger voters it needs?

The answers will tell us whether our community can look forward to greater unity in future, or is in danger of becoming even more divided.