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65% of Hongkongers dissatisfied with prevailing human rights policies, show dramatic increase in empathy towards asylum-seekers and refugees, their right to work, and right of abode for children

Effective social and governmental dialogue on human rights concerns an indispensable part of the way forward for Hong Kong

65% of Hongkongers are dissatisfied with the Hong Kong government's human rights policies and see immediate improvement as necessary, while over 70% claim to have “neutral” or “positive” perceptions of the asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong. These findings from a recent poll suggest that the political turmoil over the past year has led Hongkongers to attach a greater importance to human rights and increasingly feel that these rights should apply to marginalised groups in society as well.

The poll, commissioned by the Department of Asian and Policy Studies (The Education University of Hong Kong) and conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI) between **6 April and 23 April**, 2020, interviewed 1,002 Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong Chinese aged over 18, equivalent to a response rate of 57.1%.

The results show a close to 6% increase to 65% of respondents concerned about how the Hong Kong government is handling human rights issues, up from 59.1% two years ago (see Table 1). This increase is associated with a significant drop in the proportion of respondents harbouring negative perceptions of asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong at 16% this year, down more than 10% from the 26.8% in both 2016 and 2018 (See Table 3). As the poll was carried out in the wake of the intense controversy surrounding the now-defunct extradition bill, the team believes that the social unrest in the past year has had a major role to play in improving local attitudes towards marginalised groups, aside from causing widespread apprehension towards the human rights situation in Hong Kong.

The results show that the top concern of Hongkongers remained freedom of speech (17%), followed by police abuse of power (10%) and political freedom (10%), while back in 2018, the top concern was again freedom of speech (16.2%), followed by issues relating to asylum-seekers and refugees (8.1%) (see Table 2).

Table 1. Do you think the Hong Kong government should improve its human rights policy?

	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018
Yes	65%	59.1%
No	25%	31.0%
No idea/difficult to say	10%	10.0%
Total	100%	100%

Table 2. What are the human rights issues you think Hong Kong is facing? (Options not provided, respondents can suggest more than one answer)

	Percent of cases	Percent of cases
	2020	2018
Freedom of speech	17%	16.2%
Police abuse of power and misconduct	10%	-
Political freedom	10%	4.4%
Racial discrimination	5%	3.5%
Asylum-seekers and refugees rights	3%	8.1%

Regarding the perception of asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong, the percentage of those who are neutral and positive has increased from a total of 69.1% in 2016 and 69.2% in 2018 to **80%** this year - a dramatic increase when compared with the previous two surveys - whereas negative perception has decreased from 26.8% in 2016 and 2018 to 16% in 2020.

Table 3. What do you think of the asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong?

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Positive	6%	5.1%	4.7%
Neutral	74%	64.1%	64.4%
Negative	16%	26.8%	26.8%
No idea/difficult to say	4%	4%	4.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The results indicate an increased awareness of human rights issues, especially of those concerning the vulnerable asylum-seeking and refugee community. Over 60% of respondents believe that asylum-seeking and refugee children should be granted the right of abode in Hong Kong, a 10% increase from the previous biennial survey (see Table 4). Likewise, granting this community the right to work has risen to become the second-most supported means of resolving refugee issues (supported by 45% of the respondents), after the most favoured option of “arresting snakeheads and human trafficking syndicates” (63%) (see Table 5).

Table 4. Do you think the children of asylum-seekers born and educated in Hong Kong should have the right of abode?

	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018
Yes	61%	51.6%
No	28%	38.5%
No idea/difficult to say	11%	9.9%
Total	100%	100%

Table 5. Which policies should the government implement to solve the issue? (Multiple choice)

	Percent of cases	Percent of cases	Percent of cases
	2020	2018	2016
Arrest snakeheads and members of human trafficking syndicates	63%	62.4%	64.5%
Allow those who have been here for more than 5 years to work in low-end jobs so that they can help solve the labour shortage problem and improve their quality for life	45%	33.9%	32.2%
Reform the USM (Unified Screening Mechanism) system and retrain staff	43%	36.6%	36.9%
Hire more staff to speed up the USM process	38%	38.3%	30.6%
Build a detention camp	24%	23.6%	26.5%

While we see a positive development in terms of attitude towards the group, more than half concede to not understanding well the issues relating to asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong. Table 6 shows that 46.4% of the local respondents still believe that the asylum-seekers and refugees in Hong Kong can become Hong Kong citizens, which is not the case.

Table 6. Do you think asylum-seekers can become Hong Kong citizens under the current Hong Kong immigration system?

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Yes	46.4%	46.4%	46.9%
No	39.5%	42.3%	38.6%
No idea/difficult to say	14.1%	11.3%	14.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The data suggest that Hongkongers' increasingly positive perception of refugees and asylum-seekers is not strongly correlated with an increasing familiarity with the group. Instead, their changing perceptions may be more due to a greater sense of empathy resulting from the political turmoil in recent months, which centred on contested definitions of human rights and has threatened to displace Hongkongers en masse to make them refugees themselves. Such factors may be behind the increased support for modifying laws to better guarantee the human rights of not just mainstream society, but also marginalised groups, as seen in nearly half of the respondents (49%) believing that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) should be incorporated into local legislation (see Table 7).

Table 7. Do you agree that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be included in local legislation?

	Percentage
Yes	49%
No	18%
No idea/difficult to say	33%
Total	100%

However, respondents do not thoroughly understand the implications of the reservations taken by the Hong Kong government to the UNCRC (Table 8). These reservations give the government the authority to deny the community of asylum-seekers and refugees protection by the UNCRC. This suggests that while Hongkongers have become more aware of the importance of human rights, they are not particularly well-informed about the mechanisms that can be employed to protect these rights.

Table 8. Do you think that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) protects the children of asylum-seekers and refugees under the current system?

	Percentage
Yes	33%
No	24%
No idea/difficult to say	43%
Total	100%

Respondents consistently believe that people in Hong Kong ought to know more about the non-Chinese ethnic groups living in their midst (Table 9).

**Table 9. To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
Hong Kong people need to know more about other ethnic groups.**

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
	2020	2018	2016
Disagree	10%	10.9%	10.4%
Partly agree	5%	3.7%	5.7%
Agree	83%	82.8%	80.8%
No idea/difficult to say	2%	2.6%	3.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

In her interpretation of the polling results, Principal Investigator Dr Isabella NG believes that the increasing local awareness of human rights issues is a positive development, as Hongkongers had generally been apathetic towards such issues in the past, viewing these as not immediately relevant to their daily lives. However, this has changed with the recent tumult in the territory. “Amidst the failure of the Hong Kong government to enter into genuinely constructive dialogue and cooperation with the community to defuse the hostility

amongst different groups, human rights-related issues have been brought to the fore in the territory, once known for its tolerance, effective governance, and freedom,” she says.

The data likewise show an increasingly positive attitude towards asylum-seekers and refugees, alongside greater support for granting the right of abode to asylum-seeking and refugee children and the right to work to those of age. These suggest that the general public are increasingly conscious of how the territory’s official policies on refugees reflect their government’s approach to human rights in general, the latter of which has implications for both locals and non-locals alike. Empathy for refugees in a time where Hongkongers themselves face displacement may be another factor responsible for these trends.

Nonetheless, respondents clearly showed that they lacked a sufficient grasp of how concepts like human rights and democracy are defined and applied both locally and internationally. Misconstruals of what these terms entail have led to people of differing political persuasions frequently talking past each other, impeding the search for solutions acceptable to all on hotly debated issues that have caused deep rifts in Hong Kong society. “[W]e urgently need level-headed and open public dialogue, supported by civic education, on how human rights can be feasibly defined and guaranteed in the local context. Only then will we be able to allay Hongkongers’ fear and enable them to continue contributing to society in meaningful ways. Such an approach is indispensable if China is to remain a competitive and respected member of the international community,” says Dr Ng. The team calls on both the Hong Kong and Chinese government to adopt a constructive and sincere approach towards rebuilding trust with the Hong Kong people, instead of adopting an uncompromising attitude towards the community at large.

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