

An important week ahead

In many ways this will be one of the most important weeks in recent times. It will be a week that will shape what happens over the next four to five years and have an impact on your lives as teenagers and also into your early twenties. You have no control over this week nor even have a small say in what will happen. Yet the events of this week will determine much of what happens in the world during the remainder of this decade and beyond.

On Tuesday Americans have the opportunity to cast their vote and have a say on who shall be their President for the next four years. Voting is not compulsory, however, many Americans will vote and decide who shall be the next President; Barack Obama of the Democratic Party or Mitt Romney of the Republican Party. The choice is simple; one man, one party.

The latest opinion polls indicate that Tuesday's result will be close with Barack Obama slightly in front leading into Election Day. The winner shall serve for the next four years after which a new election must be held. Barack Obama has already been in office four years and should he win this election he will start his second four year term. If this is the case, he will complete a full eight years in the White House, the maximum time for a President according to the American constitution. Should Mitt Romney win on Tuesday then he will commence his first four years in office and fight another election campaign in four years time in 2016.

Both Obama and Romney have long track records in politics. Romney is also a very successful businessman and a millionaire. Whoever wins this election, and we shall find out on Wednesday Hong Kong time, will unquestionably become the most important figure and influential person in the world. In spite of all its economic problems and military commitments the United States is still the world's leading economy and only super-power. One should not underestimate the importance of the USA in what happens across the world.

On Thursday this week the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party begins in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Seven of the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee will be retiring, including Hu Jintao who will complete his term as General Secretary of the Party. The Congress is part of a five-year cycle with the 19th Congress to be held in 2017. But this Congress is especially important given the number of vacant seats on the Politburo Standing

Committee, the Central Military Commission and the State Council. It is seen as the most important leadership change in the Party for many years. The contenders touted for promotion are already successful high ranking party officials. Most are in their early to late 60s. Political observers note that the leading contenders are conservatives with traditional views on China and its relationship to the world. If that is the case then any major political reform would appear unlikely, at least in the near future.

There is a great deal at stake in the result of the US election and the leadership changes within the Chinese Communist Party. The USA and China are the two dominant players in world affairs and likely to remain so for the remainder of this century. Only the Russian Federation could be in a position to join their ranks. Yet the challenges facing Washington and Beijing are great and none more so than the widening gap between rich and poor in their societies. The wealth gap in the USA is increasing year by year. The sight of thousands of homeless people on the streets of New York, Los Angeles and other cities is not what one would expect of the world's largest economy. But the gap is widening with 7.9% of Americans looking for work and an even higher percentage among young people. In China the gap between rich and poor will pose enormous challenges for the new leadership and likely shape the direction China takes in the future. Communities across China are venting their anger over corrupt local officials. The people are also angry about pollution, landowners and low wages.

We in Hong Kong are not isolated and immune from these issues. The gap between rich and poor is widening in our city and the people are voicing their discontent. The picture of an elderly refuse collector steering her trolley of cardboard boxes along the streets of Hong Kong clogged by luxury cars should make us feel uncomfortable and not very proud of the society in which we live. Providing the elderly with an old age living allowance of HK\$2,200 per month or \$72 per day is such a small price to pay in our materialistic and money-driven society.

As Archbishop Emeritus Peter Kwong said at an assembly last week we should look at living saintly lives and be willing to give. The challenge facing Hong Kong officials and the new leadership in both the USA and China will be how to address the needs of all the people particularly those less fortunate and in need of help.

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