



Hong Kong: The international community must take a principled stand against repression

(Bangkok, 7 May 2021) – The international community must take a strong, principled stand against the escalating repression and reprisals against human rights activists and civil society in Hong Kong, said the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), Asia Democracy Network (ADN), and CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation.

‘Authorities in China and Hong Kong have relentlessly harassed activists and human rights defenders, further shrinking an already repressive civic space. State-led intimidation towards civil society, including through the National Security Law continues to escalate, closing space for dissent,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA

The year 2021 saw the continued assault on civic space in Hong Kong. In January alone, 53 pro-democracy activists were arrested under the National Security Law, accused of trying to ‘overthrow’ the government.¹

In April, a Hong Kong court sentenced prominent pro-democracy activists – including media figure Jimmy Lai, barrister Margaret Ng and Democratic Party founding chairperson Martin Lee – to prison for their participation in anti-government protests in 2018 and 2019.² Lai was sentenced to 14 months in prison while other activists received suspended sentences or jail terms. On 6 May, activist Joshua Wong was sentenced to an additional ten months in jail for his participation in a vigil last year marking the Tiananmen Square crackdown.³

The National People’s Congress Standing Committee recently overhauled Hong Kong’s electoral system, giving Chinese security bodies the authority to investigate political candidates. It also created a committee with the power to bar any election candidate deemed ‘insufficiently loyal’ to the government from running in elections.⁴

‘These changes to the electoral system blatantly obliterate any remaining spaces for democracy. The implementation of these changes will have a devastating impact on the opposition’s capacity to represent opposing views, effectively compromising the ability of the people of Hong Kong to have their voices heard,’ said Josef Benedict, CIVICUS Asia Pacific researcher

The rights groups are concerned that these changes are another step towards a full-blown China-style authoritarian rule. For years, the pro-democracy movement has raised grave concerns over China’s increasing influence in the city’s governance and democracy. The National Security Law imposed in June 2020 gave Chinese authorities broad powers to stamp out any form of opposition

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-5555299>

² [prominent pro-democracy personalities](#)

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57005120>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/world/asia/hong-kong-election-law.html>

to the ruling party and set up a security apparatus in the city, effectively cementing China's authoritarian influence.

In April 2021, the legislature, now devoid of opposition, passed an immigration law that critics argue will allow the government to stop people from entering and leaving the city.⁵ Set to take effect on 1 August, the law's vague wording has raised fears it would lead to 'exit bans', similar to China's ban against activists leaving the country.

Activists have been forced to hide or flee in fear of persecution by Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. Since the anti-extradition protests in 2019, authorities have wielded disproportionate and excessive violence against the democracy movement, weaponised repressive laws and used surveillance to intimidate and harass protesters, the media and any other critical voices.

'China and Hong Kong authorities should not be impenetrable to international scrutiny and action. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, China must be held accountable for its systematic human rights violations and its assault on fundamental freedoms, which falls grossly short of standards expected of members of the Council.

As the international community begins to grasp the gravity of its violations not just in Hong Kong, it must prove itself capable of taking a stand for human rights and the protection of all,' said the groups.

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

The Asia Democracy Network (ADN) works to promote and advance democratisation and democratic governance at all levels of society through effective solidarity and cooperation among civil society organisations and democracy advocates in Asia. ADN is committed to building a just, equitable and sustainable community of democratic societies in Asia, where all human rights of all individuals, groups and peoples are fully respected and realised. www.adnasia.org

CIVICUS is a global alliance dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world with 8,500 members in more than 175 countries. Based out of Johannesburg, CIVICUS has offices in New York and Geneva. www.civicus.org

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⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/28/hong-kong-passes-law-that-can-stop-people-leaving>