

JUNE 29, 2025

China: Building a ‘Patriots Only’ Hong Kong

Five Years under National Security Law, Rights Erased, New Ideological Controls
Published in

- China’s government has erased Hong Kong’s freedoms since imposing the draconian National Security Law on June 30, 2020.
- The Chinese government has largely dismantled freedoms of expression, association and assembly, free and fair elections, fair trial rights and judicial independence, and ended the city’s semi-democracy.
- Other governments should press the Chinese government to end its repressive policies in Hong Kong by holding responsible officials to account.



A flag raising ceremony on National Security Education Day at a secondary school in Hong Kong, China, April 15, 2021.

© 2021 Vernon Yuen/NurPhoto via AP Photo

(New York) – China’s government has erased Hong Kong’s freedoms since imposing the draconian National Security Law on June 30, 2020, Human Rights Watch said today.

Chinese and Hong Kong authorities have harshly punished critics of the government, created a highly repressive national security regime, and enforced ideological controls on the city’s residents. Increasingly, only Chinese Communist Party loyalists – that is, “patriots” – can occupy key positions in society.

“In just five years, the Chinese government has extinguished Hong Kong’s political and civil vibrancy and replaced it with the uniformity of enforced patriotism,” said Maya Wang, associate China director at Human Rights Watch. “This heightened oppression may have dire long-term consequences for Hong Kong, even though many Hong Kongers have found subtle ways to resist tyrannical rule.”

Since adopting the National Security Law, the Chinese government has largely dismantled freedoms of expression, association and assembly, as well as free and fair elections, fair trial rights and judicial independence. The government has increasingly politicized education, created impunity for police abuses,

and ended the city's semi-democracy. Many of Hong Kong's independent civil society groups, labor unions, political parties, and media outlets have been shuttered.

The Chinese government has been building a new and opaque national security legal regime and bureaucracy, weaponizing the courts to hand down severe punishment for dissent – up to life in prison – and harassing and surveilling Hong Kongers at home and abroad. The authorities are also rewriting Hong Kong's history.

When Britain handed over Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997, Beijing promised a “high degree of autonomy” and that “Hong Kong people rule Hong Kong.” Since 2020, the Chinese Communist Party – which is not even registered as a political party in Hong Kong – has extended its control over all levers of government in Hong Kong, by embedding Beijing's concept of national security into Hong Kong laws, and by revamping the city's governance structure.

Several other governments and the United Nations have expressed concern about the rapid deterioration of freedoms in Hong Kong, but few have taken concrete actions. The United States imposed sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials in 2020, 2021, and 2025 for abuses associated with the National Security Law, but was the only government to do so. The United Kingdom, the European Union, and Australia, which also have human rights sanctions regimes, should impose targeted sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials most responsible for serious rights violations, Human Rights Watch said.

“Governments should press the Chinese government to end its repressive policies in Hong Kong by holding responsible officials to account,” Wang said, “Beijing should no longer feel emboldened to tighten its grip on Hong Kong people without consequences.”

Gutting Hong Kong's Freedoms

Demolishing Hong Kong's Semi-Democracy

Among the Chinese government's actions after imposing the National Security Law in June 2020 was to turn Hong Kong's vibrant semi-democratic Legislative Council into a rubber stamp like China's National People's Congress.

The Chinese and Hong Kong authorities first disqualified pro-democracy legislators from holding office for “endangering national security.” The authorities then prosecuted 45 pro-democracy politicians and activists for “subversion” under the National Security Law. They were convicted and sentenced to between 4 years and 2 months and 10 years in prison.

The authorities also changed the regulations so that only “patriots” – as those who “support the ... leadership of the Chinese Communist Party” are called – could run in Legislative Council elections, and revised the electoral laws to prohibit the “incitement of others to cast blank ballots.” In 2023, the

Legislative Council unanimously voted to adopt similar electoral changes to the District Council, which oversees local affairs.

With pro-democracy figures barred from running for office, and people unable to cast blank protest votes, the 2021 Legislative Council elections were meaningless and had a record-low voter turnout at 30 percent. The Council now also struggles with low attendance at its meetings.

Demolishing Civil Society, Political Parties

The Chinese and Hong Kong governments have dismantled Hong Kong's independent civil society organizations by imprisoning and harassing organizers and activists and freezing groups' funds. Since 2020, nearly 100 civil society organizations, labor unions, and political parties have been disbanded. These include some of the city's oldest and largest groups that formed the backbone of the city's democracy movement, such as the Civil Human Rights Front, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, and the Civic Party. The Democratic Party, founded in 1994, is set to disband.

After resisting five years of intensifying harassment, which included prosecutions and home searches, Hong Kong's last pro-democracy political party, the League of Social Democrats, announced its disbandment in late June.

Suppressing Freedom of Assembly

The imposition of the National Security Law coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. Hong Kong authorities abused Covid-related measures to prohibit peaceful assemblies, including, in 2020 and 2021, the annual vigil at Victoria Park that commemorated the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. The authorities have charged the Hong Kong Alliance, the organizer of the vigil, and its three former leaders with "inciting subversion" under the National Security law, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison. Every year since 2020 around June 4, Hong Kong people who tried commemorating the massacre near Victoria Park have been arrested and imprisoned on dubious charges.

For decades, Hong Kong had massive pro-democracy protests, some attracting over a million people, but the authorities have not permitted any such demonstration since 2020. Police harass the few people who show up for even nonpolitical protests. In 2023, a small rally concerning land reclamation took place only after organizers agreed to stringent police demands requiring no more than 100 participants who would wear number tags, have their banners examined in advance, and stay behind a police cordon away from the media.

The Hong Kong government has continued to persecute protesters who participated in the 2019 protests: As of April, 10,279 people had been arrested, 2,976 prosecuted, and 2,422 convicted.

Eliminating Independent Media

Since the adoption of the National Security Law, at least 14 independent media outlets have shuttered, including Apple Daily in June 2021 and Stand News in December 2021. The two influential outlets were forced to close following high-profile police raids and arrests of their editors for national security crimes. Apple Daily's owner, Jimmy Lai, 77, is serving a 5 year and 9-month prison sentence on charges of "fraud" and "participating in an unauthorized assembly." He faces a maximum of life in prison in an ongoing National Security Law trial for "foreign collusion."

Self-censorship among journalists is rampant. In 2022, the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club ended its Human Rights Press Awards; its then-chair Keith Richburg said his lawyer told him that he would not get "a fair hearing before a national security law judge." After the major Chinese-language outlet Ming Pao dismissed two political columnists in 2023, its editor-in-chief warned the remaining writers to "be extra careful."

Widespread Censorship

Shortly after the National Security Law was passed, Hong Kong authorities banned 2019 protest slogans such as "Liberate Hong Kong, the Revolution of Our Times." They also pulled China and Hong Kong-related political art, films, and books from museums, theaters, public libraries, and the annual book fair, and blocked access to pro-democracy websites.

Censorship has broadened to works that are not explicitly political. In 2025, the Hong Kong government permanently removed 10 bronze sculptures that had been on display since 2017. Two of the figures wore yellow raincoats, which became associated with protests after a pro-democracy demonstrator fell to his death while wearing one in 2019.

Censorship also became institutionalized. In 2021, the Hong Kong government amended the Film Censorship Ordinance, enabling the authorities to censor films deemed "contrary to the interests of national security."

The Hong Kong Immigration Department has frequently refused entry or visas to people critical of the government, including journalists, academics, rights advocates, artists, and the British parliament member Wera Hobhouse. In some cases, they were questioned for hours before being deported.

Creating a "Patriots Only" Hong Kong

New National Security Legal Regime and Bureaucracy

The Chinese and Hong Kong governments have established a national security legal regime. Augmenting the National Security Law, the Hong Kong government in March 2024 also introduced the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO).

The Hong Kong authorities also revived a colonial-era sedition law under the Crimes Ordinance. After the Court of Final Appeal ruled in December 2021 that sedition constituted a security-related crime, sedition

has become the most frequently used national security offense to target a wide range of peaceful expression, including children's books, independent journalism, and social media posts. The SNSO further raised the maximum penalty for sedition from 2 to 7 years in prison, and 10 years when it involves “collusion with foreign forces.”

Taken together, the three laws expand police powers, stipulate harsh punishments up to life in prison for peaceful speech and activism, and deprive suspects of fair trial rights. Suspects are typically denied bail, subjected to years of prolonged pretrial detention, and tried not by a jury but by judges hand-picked by Hong Kong's chief executive.

Since 2020, 326 people have been arrested for national security offenses; and 187 people and 5 companies have been charged. National security trials have a nearly 100 percent conviction rate.

The Chinese and Hong Kong governments have also established a new national security bureaucracy: the Office for Safeguarding National Security, which appears to be part of China's spy agency, the Ministry of State Security; the Hong Kong National Security Committee, a government body consisting of senior Hong Kong officials and a Beijing “adviser” on national security matters; and the National Security Department under the Hong Kong Police Force.

Very little information is available about these extremely powerful bodies. The Hong Kong government allocated HK\$13 billion (US\$1.7 million) for national security between 2020 and 2023 but would not disclose the amount allocated in subsequent years.

In May, the Hong Kong government enacted a set of subsidiary laws accompanying the SNSO that further expand the powers of the Office for Safeguarding National Security, including punishing those who disclose information related to its possible investigations with up to seven years in prison. In June, the Office for Safeguarding National Security and the National Security Department conducted their first joint operation, arresting six people affiliated with an organization for “foreign collusion”; no further information was released.

Chinese Communist Party Establishes Direct Rule

Since 2020, the Chinese government's rule over Hong Kong has undergone significant changes. A set of “institutional reforms” in 2023 further asserted the Chinese Communist Party's control of state institutions in China. These resulted in China's top Hong Kong affairs office being operated under dual identities: as a government office (Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council), and as a Chinese Communist Party body (Hong Kong and Macao Work Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party), but with the same leadership team. This so-called institutional doubling has been a feature in China's governance under President Xi Jinping.

This new arrangement has drastically expanded the scope of Beijing's control over Hong Kong's affairs. The office is now responsible for “supervising the implementation ... of the Chinese Communist Party

Central Committee’s power of comprehensive governance” over Hong Kong, a goal the Chinese government has articulated since 2014.

The Chinese government maintains that Hong Kong is still ruled under a policy of “One Country, Two Systems,” which has not as a practical matter been the case since at least 2020. The 2023 “reforms” cemented what has increasingly become “One Country, One System,” in which the Party increasingly asserts its supremacy in governance and society and is effectively running the city.

On paper, the Hong Kong government is headed by a Hong Konger, the Beijing-appointed Chief Executive John Lee. But real power firmly rests with the Chinese Communist Party’s top leadership. Since 2020, the Party’s institutional arrangements have meant that a mainland official – currently Zhou Ji – holds three Hong Kong leadership titles, including his “adviser” role over the Hong Kong National Security Committee, which allows him to effectively direct Hong Kong affairs. Hong Kong governance now resembles that of Xinjiang and Tibet, where the ethnic Uyghur and Tibetan leaders listed as heads of government in these nominally “autonomous” regions are subordinate to Han Chinese Party officials.

Administrative Punishments, Threats, Intimidation

People in Hong Kong now face persecution from many fronts, not only police surveillance and harsh prison sentences for dissent, but also harassment from Hong Kong government agencies, smears from Beijing-owned media outlets, and threats from pro-Beijing organized crime triads.

The problems faced by the Hong Kong Journalists’ Association, the city’s largest union of local journalists and the only major union remaining, are illustrative. In 2024, Hong Kong tax authorities ordered the Journalists’ Association without evident basis to pay HK\$400,000 (US\$51,000) in back taxes. The group was a repeated target of smear campaigns by Beijing-owned media. Its previous chairperson was arrested during a reporting assignment. In 2025, two hotels cancelled the group’s reservation for a fund-raising dinner without explanation.

At least eight other media outlets and 20 individuals affiliated with these outlets have reported similar demands for bogus “back taxes,” including those ostensibly owed by spouses and parents. Other kinds of harassment against Hong Kong journalists include death threats and false complaints against them sent to government departments.

Surveillance of Residents and Activists Released from Prison

In 2020, Hong Kong police set up a national security hotline to encourage people to report on each other; by June 2025, it had received over 920,000 tips.

Hong Kong activists released from prison are now subjected to police surveillance, arbitrary restrictions on their movements, and pressure to inform on others, tactics long used by the authorities in mainland China.

The activist Agnes Chow said that after her release, national security police watched her closely and forced her to meet with them regularly. Before she left Hong Kong to study in Canada, the police pressed her to spy on other Hong Kong activists there. When she refused, police took her to mainland China, where she was shown “the brilliant achievements” of “the motherland.” The pro-independence activist Tony Chung reported a similar experience.

Repression Extended Abroad

The Chinese and Hong Kong governments have used the national security legal regime to try to silence critics in the diaspora, many of whom left Hong Kong due to growing repression. Hong Kong police have issued baseless National Security Law arrest warrants and HK\$1 million (US\$129,000) bounties for 19 exiled Hong Kong activists who live in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Australia. The government has also cancelled their passports.

The authorities have also targeted their funding sources. In 2023, Hong Kong police arrested 12 people linked to the now-defunct 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which police accused of providing financial support for exiled activists, and four others for subscribing to the Patreon pages of two “wanted” activists.

Hong Kong police have also harassed the activists’ families, interrogating and detaining them, as well as raiding their homes. In February, the authorities confiscated HK\$800,000 (US\$103,000) from an activist and his family. In the first known prosecution of a family member of an exiled activist, national security police in April charged the father of the “wanted” activist Anna Kwok for allegedly handling her finances, an SNSO crime punishable by up to seven years in prison.

Harassment of these 19 activists has intensified both online and offline, including rape and death threats, some linked to Chinese authorities. In 2024, over two dozen anonymous online accounts attempted to mobilize people on the far-right to attack two UK-based activists. In 2025, some London residents received anonymous letters urging them to hand over two “wanted” UK-based activists to the Chinese embassy. Similar letters targeted Ted Hui, an Australian-based activist. Joe Tay, who was running for office in Canada, had to scale back his campaign fearing for his safety after online harassment. Hong Kong police also took his family in for questioning.

Rewriting History

Hong Kong authorities have been seeking to rewrite history as the city’s information landscape is increasingly dominated by Beijing-friendly voices.

In 2022, the Hong Kong Education Bureau released four sets of textbooks denying that Hong Kong was ever a British colony. In 2023, the police aired a television program featuring a young activist in prison, expressing remorse about his participation in the 2019 protest in a style similar to China’s coerced televised confessions of activists.

The authorities have continued to characterize the 2019 protest movement as a “black-clad riot” instigated by “foreign proxies.” In addition, they have mobilized the Hong Kong justice system to rewrite one infamous event during the protest, when pro-Beijing thugs assaulted protesters and passersby at a train station.

Although the authorities arrested some of the alleged assailants, they also arrested some victims for “rioting” after the National Security Law was imposed, and convicted and sentenced them to between 25 months and 37 months in prison. The violent assault – witnessed by many Hong Kongers – is now being officially portrayed as a “fight” between “two groups of people who hold different political views.”

Imposing Ideological Control

The Chinese and Hong Kong governments have used the national security regime to impose ideological control on Hong Kong’s population.

The authorities have revised school curriculum and guidelines to mandate political indoctrination from kindergarten through primary and secondary school, with the aim of “systematically cultivating students’ ... sense of national identity from an early age.” In 2023, the Hong Kong government eliminated Liberal Studies, a required subject for most secondary school students that encouraged critical thinking, blaming it for the 2019 protests and replacing it with one that fosters patriotism and requires trips to mainland China. Primary school students are encouraged to take similar trips. Secondary school students are taught “Xi Jinping Thought,” while publicly funded university students must take national security courses.

The government also imposes patriotism more broadly. It punishes dissent against Chinese national symbols, starkly illustrated by enactment of the National Anthem Law in June 2020 to criminalize “insulting” the Chinese national anthem. At least six people have been arrested for booing during the national anthem, failing to stand up while the national anthem was being played, and sharing a video in which the national anthem was replaced with the protest anthem “Glory to Hong Kong.”

At the same time, the authorities mark April 15 as National Security Education Day, organizing city-wide promotional events, and creating programs to recruit students and members of the public as “ambassadors” to promote national security. Hong Kong government departments, no longer politically neutral, fund shows featuring dancers dressed like Cultural Revolution Red Guards.

Building a “Patriots Only” Hong Kong

Increasingly, Hong Kongers in careers with broad social reach are required to pass national security examinations, while those in leadership positions are required to show loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party.

Since 2020, China's state-run media outlets have identified and attacked judges who ruled against the government or acquitted pro-democracy supporters. After being targeted by such a smear campaign, Judge Sham Shiu-man retired early and left Hong Kong in 2021.

In 2021, the authorities required more than 180,000 civil servants in Hong Kong to sign a document pledging allegiance to the government. Hundreds resigned or were fired for failing to do so. New civil servants are now required to pledge allegiance to the government and attend training that aims to instill patriotism.

Starting in 2023, kindergarten and publicly funded primary and secondary school teachers have been required to pass a test on their knowledge of the national security laws.

In 2024, the Hong Kong government amended the relevant regulations to ban for life any social worker convicted of national security offenses. It also restructured the Social Workers Registration Board, reducing the proportion of elected board members and requiring the board's chair and vice-chair be appointed by the chief executive. The restructured board then suspended eight social workers with convictions related to the 2019 protests.

In 2025, the government introduced amendments to labor union laws, which will permanently bar those convicted of national security offenses from serving in labor unions and require that unions do not accept funding from "external forces."

Even Hong Kong's richest man, Li Ka-shing, faces intensifying pressure to demonstrate loyalty. In 2025, Chinese officials and Beijing-owned newspapers subjected Lee to weeks of pressure as his conglomerate tried to sell its Panama Canal port assets to a US-led consortium of companies. Beijing-owned papers even suggested that the deal might endanger national security.

Region / Country

- Asia
- China and Tibet

Tags

- Hong Kong



A child poses for a photo at the Hong Kong Correctional Services Academy during the National Security Education Day in Hong Kong, April 15, 2023.

© 2023 Louise Delmotte/AP Photo