

In December, amendments to anti-terrorist legislation were approved that would allow for the deployment of technology for intercepting messages, calls, metadata and mass geo-referencing without establishing appropriate safeguards on its use and access to it.

1. *Bill for the Regulation of the Use of Force*, 4 June (Spanish only) 1

CHINA

The People's Republic of China

The government continued to enforce repressive laws and policies that restricted the right to freedom of expression and other human rights. Human rights defenders were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced to long prison terms. Activists living overseas faced threats and intimidation. New restrictions on religious freedom were introduced in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and prosecutions of intellectuals, artists and other Uyghur cultural figures continued. Chinese authorities' repression of Tibetan culture and language intensified. Renewable energy generation capacity was expanded but China remained heavily reliant on coal. A new national security law further restricted civic space in Hong Kong where dozens of pro-democracy activists were sentenced to long prison terms.

BACKGROUND

Amid growing concerns about economic slowdown, falling birthrates and an ageing population, the government intensified its focus on ensuring “stability”, resulting in increased restrictions on human rights. The tightening grip of the Chinese authorities and the continued lack of transparency were demonstrated by the expulsions from the Chinese Communist Party of officials for accessing “forbidden” publications, the imposition of restrictions on civil servant travel and censorship of consumer rights scandals.

Despite government denials, weapons and other military equipment manufactured in China were used by parties to the armed conflict in Sudan. In the conflict in Myanmar, evidence continued to implicate Chinese state and non-state actors in supplying aviation fuel to the military, enabling air strikes against civilian targets and other war crimes.

Hong Kong's economy remained slow with many stores and restaurants closing down. The fiscal deficit persisted and the fiscal reserves fell to their lowest level since 2010. Efforts by the authorities to rebuild the territory's image as an international hub for foreign investment and tourism were hindered by the ongoing crackdown against political opponents.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

Artists and others were among those prosecuted under restrictive laws. On 5 January, authorities arrested Chen Pinlin, the director of a documentary about the 2022 White Paper Movement, a peaceful protest movement against highly restrictive Covid-19 policies and pervasive censorship and surveillance. He was charged with “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and remained in detention awaiting trial at year's end.¹ In September, Gao Zhen, a renowned artist whose work includes critical depictions of social issues, was detained on suspicion of “insulting revolutionary heroes and martyrs”. Gao Zhen, who lived in the USA, was visiting relatives in China at the time of his arrest. He was awaiting trial at year's end.²

In April the Ministry of State Security issued new regulations granting additional powers to law enforcement officers to inspect electronic devices including those of overseas visitors to China. The new regulations, which came into force in July, expanded the scope of existing counter-espionage laws to encompass “national security” matters while also weakening their procedural safeguards.

In June, in a rare response to public pressure, the central government withdrew a draft amendment to the Law on Administrative Penalties for Public Security.

The amendment included vaguely worded offences against conduct “undermining the spirit” and “hurting the feelings” of the nation. However, other steps were taken to further expand the legal and regulatory framework restricting the right to freedom of expression.

On 11 October the Cyberspace Administration of China announced new measures to restrict the use of “obscure expressions” online, targeting slang adopted by internet users to circumvent online censorship.

Also in October, local authorities in Shanghai reportedly detained at least six people wearing Halloween costumes.

The government continued its campaign to silence dissent by citizens living abroad. Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students studying at universities in western Europe and North America faced surveillance and on- and offline censorship, including by state actors. They, and some of their family members in mainland China, were subjected to harassment and intimidation to prevent them from engaging in activities relating to political or other “sensitive” issues.³

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Human rights defenders, including activists, lawyers and citizen journalists, continued to face intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention, and torture and other ill-treatment for defending human rights and exercising their freedoms of expression and association. Their repression was often enabled by recourse to overly-broad and vague national security laws. In some cases, harassment and intimidation extended to their family members.

On 14 February, the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers wrote to the government to raise concerns about administrative restrictions on, the criminalization of, and other patterns of interference in the work of lawyers. According to the Special Rapporteur, human rights lawyers working on sensitive cases were particularly targeted.

Following her trial in December 2023, labour and women’s rights activist Li Qiaochu

was convicted in February of “inciting subversion of state power”. She was sentenced to three years and eight months in prison.⁴ She was released in August because of time already served.

Three other human rights defenders, lawyers Li Yuhan and Chang Weiping and anti-discrimination activist Cheng Yuan, were released from prison. All three continued to face restrictions on their freedom of movement and were deprived of “political rights” following their release.

In June, Guangzhou Intermediate Court sentenced Sophia Huang Xueqin and Wang Jianbing to five years’ and three-and-a-half years’ imprisonment, respectively, for “inciting subversion of state power”. The two prominent #MeToo and labour rights activists had been detained since they were arrested in September 2021 due to their involvement in trainings for non-violent protest and participation in discussions on shrinking civil society space.⁵

In August, citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was detained after engaging in human rights advocacy. She had been subjected to surveillance since her release from prison in May 2024.

In October, detained women’s and health rights defender He Fangmei was sentenced to five years and six months’ imprisonment in connection with her campaigning for safe vaccines. He Fangmei had given birth to a second daughter while in detention; at some point, both children were taken by local officials and placed in a psychiatric hospital. In April the girls, aged three and eight, were reportedly moved but their whereabouts were unknown.

In October, Lu Siwei, a human rights lawyer known for defending politically sensitive cases, was arrested and charged with “crossing the border illegally”. Lu Siwei had previously been detained by police in Laos in July 2023 and forcibly returned to China.

Concerns about conditions of detention and torture and other ill-treatment of human rights defenders persisted. In October, legal scholar and activist Xu Zhiyong, who was serving a 14-year prison sentence for

“subversion of state power”, reportedly went on hunger strike to protest his mistreatment by prison guards.

The health of Xu Yan, arrested in April 2023 with her husband Yu Wensheng, reportedly deteriorated in detention due to poor nutrition. The two activists were sentenced on 29 October to one year and nine months’ and three years’ imprisonment respectively for “inciting subversion of state power”.⁶

In March, 14 UN experts condemned the continued failure of the Chinese authorities to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death in custody in 2014 of human rights defender Cao Shunli. She was detained in 2013 as she was preparing to participate in China’s UPR process but her health deteriorated, allegedly due to torture and other ill-treatment including denial of access to medical care.

ETHNIC AUTONOMOUS REGIONS

The government continued to enforce repressive policies in ethnic autonomous regions, especially the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Tibet, denying rights including to cultural expression and to freedom of religion and belief. Repression of ethnic and minority populations was carried out under the guise of counterterrorism and national security.

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

In January the government published a white paper entitled Legal Framework and Measures for Counterterrorism that described efforts to ostensibly “protect” human rights in the context of counterterrorism. However, repressive laws – including the 2015 Counter Terrorism Law and the 2017 Xinjiang Regulation on De-extremification – continued to be used to arbitrarily detain members of Uyghur, Kazakh and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups and to restrict cultural and religious practices. In August the UN human rights office, OHCHR, repeated its call to the Chinese authorities to review and revise the legal framework governing national security and counterterrorism and to

strengthen the protection of minorities against discrimination.

Revisions to religious regulations took effect in February, further limiting freedom of religion and belief. The amendments to the Xinjiang Religious Affairs Regulations and statements by the Xinjiang Party Secretary emphasized the need for Islam to be “Sinicised”. This echoed previous statements by Chinese leaders, stressing “loyalty... above all else” to the Chinese Communist Party.

The detention of Uyghur cultural figures continued. Among those prosecuted during the year was film-maker Ikram Nurmehmet. He was found guilty in January of “taking part in terrorist activities” because he had travelled to Türkiye. According to media reports, Ikram Nurmehmet was subjected to torture and other ill-treatment to coerce him into “confessing” crimes he had not committed. In June, songwriter Yashar Shohret was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment for “promoting extremism” and “illegally possessing extremist materials”. The sentence was in connection with his expression of cultural identity through music and his possession of Uyghur literature.

Other prominent Uyghur scholars and artists continued to serve long prison terms and were deprived of communication with family members. They included well-known Uyghur intellectual Ilham Tohti who had been sentenced to life imprisonment for “separatism” in 2014.⁷ There was no information about the status or whereabouts of ethnographer Rahile Dawut, who was reportedly sentenced to life imprisonment in 2023 for “endangering state security”.

Tibet

Tibetan monk Rinchen Tsultrim was released on 1 February after serving a four-year sentence. He was imprisoned for “inciting secession” in relation to his social media posts. In July, 13 UN experts wrote to the Chinese government raising concerns about reports of beatings and arbitrary arrest of hundreds of Tibetan civilians and monks during protests against the construction of a hydropower plant on the Drichu river in Sichuan province. According to the letter, the

plant, which is being built by a state-owned company, could result in the forced displacement and relocation of local residents, destruction of important cultural and religious sites and environmental damage.

Closure of schools providing instruction in Tibetan and other non-Mandarin languages continued as part of the authorities' campaign to curtail Tibetan culture and languages. In July, authorities closed the Jigme Gyaltsen Vocational School, a private school in Gansu province teaching courses in Tibetan languages, whose pupils were mainly Tibetan boys. Concerns also persisted about the coercive residential school system imposed on Tibetan children. In October, Tibetan language education activist Tashi Wangchuk was reportedly detained for 15 days on charges of "disturbing social order". He had previously served a five-year prison term for "inciting separatism".

LGBTI PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

In May a Beijing Fengtai District People's Court ruling in a child custody dispute recognized the rights of a same-sex partner to monthly visits with her daughter. The ruling marked an important development in a system that does not recognize and lacks protections for same-sex relationships. However, repression of LGBTI activism continued, with activists facing risks including arbitrary detention and interrogation, and censorship of LGBTI-related topics.

DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty was believed to be extensively used but the number of executions was not known because such data remained classified as a state secret.

Access to information about state secrets, including the use of the death penalty, was further restricted by revisions to the State Secrets Protection Law, enacted in February, and to its implementation measures in July. The amendments broadened the scope of classified information and tightened government control over its disclosure. In November, national and international media

reported the case of a civil servant who was sentenced to death for violating the State Secrets Protection Law.

On 21 June the Supreme People's Court of China, the Supreme People's Procuratorate and the Ministries of Public Security, State Security and Justice jointly issued the "Opinions on Punishing 'Taiwan Independence' Diehards for Conducting or Inciting Separatism in Accordance with Law". The Opinions included directives to prosecute and harshly punish, including with death, individuals advocating for or taking action in support of Taiwan's independence.

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Substantial progress was made towards expanding renewable energy, with the government's 2030 target for wind and solar power generation achieved six years early. As a result, China's capacity for non-fossil fuel energy generation exceeded that from fossil fuels for the first time.

Nevertheless, energy consumption relied mainly on fossil fuels, which remained the largest contributor to China's greenhouse gas emissions. According to a report by the NGO Greenpeace, the number of new permits issued by the government for domestic coal-fired power plant construction decreased by 79.5% during the first half of the year. However, the pace of coal plant construction remained high, driven by projects approved in previous years.

Despite previous pledges by the government, the building of new coal-fired power plants abroad continued, and fewer existing projects were halted in 2024 than in the previous two years.

In March, IQAir reported that, in 2023, China's five-year trend of improving air quality was reversed, with thick smog returning to several cities and provinces, largely the result of burning coal.

HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION

Freedom of expression

The space for free speech, already highly restricted under the National Security Law

(NSL) and other repressive laws, diminished further.

In March, following inadequate public consultations, the Hong Kong Legislative Council unanimously passed the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO). This local law created new national security offences and increased penalties for existing offences. It also entrenched the local government's sweeping powers of enforcement. The ordinance introduced mainland China's broad and vague definitions of "national security" and "state secrets" which could potentially cover almost any conduct or information. The SNSO replaced a widely-used colonial-era sedition law, but expanded provisions that punish intention to cause "hatred or enmity amongst residents of different regions of China", and that expressly cover acts or speech which do not incite violence.⁸ The maximum prison sentence for sedition was increased from two to seven years, or up to 10 years if involving collusion with external force.

Following the adoption of the SNSO, 15 people were arrested under its sedition provisions. Four were subsequently charged. In September, three were convicted in separate trials for wearing a T-shirt and a mask printed with protest slogans; expressing political comments against the government on online platforms; and writing protest slogans on bus seats. They were sentenced to prison terms of between 10 and 14 months.

In June and December the authorities used new powers under the SNSO to cancel the passports of first six and then seven Hong Kong activists living overseas for whom arrest warrants had been issued in 2023. Another six activists living overseas were placed on a wanted list with a bounty of 1 million Hong Kong dollars (USD 128,500) each.

In May the Court of Appeal granted the government an interim injunction to ban the pro-democracy protest song "Glory to Hong Kong".⁹ The decision, which overturned a lower court ruling, prohibits individuals from broadcasting, performing, distributing, disseminating, displaying or reproducing the song with an intent against national security,

such as intention of sedition or to incite secession. Anyone breaching the injunction could be held liable for contempt of court and jailed. Following the decision, YouTube blocked users in Hong Kong from accessing 32 videos featuring the song.

Also in May, in a major case against 47 pro-democracy activists, the High Court found 14 people guilty of "conspiracy to commit subversion" under the NSL for organizing unofficial primaries for the 2020 Legislative Council elections that were ultimately postponed. Another 31 defendants had previously pleaded guilty to the same charges. In November the court handed down sentences to the 45 ranging from four years and three months to 10 years in prison. Two other defendants were acquitted, but the Department of Justice appealed against one of the acquittals.

The trial of Jimmy Lai, the 77-year-old founder of the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, on charges under the NSL of "colluding with foreign forces" continued and was still ongoing at years' end. There were concerns about Jimmy Lai's declining health after he was absent from a hearing in June. A trial monitor from Reporters Without Borders was barred from entering Hong Kong in June.

In August the Court of Final Appeal dismissed appeals by Jimmy Lai and six other activists against a previous conviction for taking part in an unauthorized assembly during the 2019 protests, for which Lai was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment.

Several people were charged with "insulting" the Chinese national anthem. In June, three people were arrested under the National Anthem Ordinance for turning their backs while the anthem was played at a football match.¹⁰ In August, another person was sentenced to eight weeks' imprisonment for covering his ears and singing a song associated with the pro-democracy movement while the anthem was played at a volleyball match in 2023.

In August, two former editors of the closed media outlet Stand News, Chung Pui-kuen and Patrick Lam, were convicted for "conspiring to publish seditious publications". In September they were

sentenced to 21 and 11 months' imprisonment, respectively. Patrick Lam filed an appeal against his conviction in October.

Freedom of assembly

The authorities continued to prevent commemorations of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. On 4 June the 35th anniversary of the crackdown, a heavy police presence was reported in and around Victoria Park where vigils had been held for 30 years before they were banned in 2020. Four people were formally arrested while another five were "brought to police stations". Bringing people to police stations is an intimidatory tactic that allows the police to remove a person from the scene without a formal arrest.

In January the Court of Final Appeal reinstated the conviction of Chow Hang-tung for "inciting others to take part in an unauthorized assembly" in 2021 on the anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown. Chow Hang-tung's trial on a separate charge under the NSL of "inciting subversion" was repeatedly delayed. She remained in pretrial detention for her role in a group which held annual Tiananmen candlelight vigils in Victoria Park.

In late May the police initiated additional proceedings, under the SNSO, against Chow Hang-tung, and arrested her mother and six of her friends for "exploit[ing] an upcoming sensitive date to repeatedly publish posts with seditious intention on a social platform".

Freedom of association

In July the Legislative Council passed a law to give government appointees a majority on the Social Workers Registration Board, the licensing body for social workers. The move followed criticism of the Board by a government official for its refusal to ban people convicted of national security offences from becoming social workers.

Also in July the Hong Kong Christian Institute announced that it was disbanding because of the "social environment" and inability to freely fulfil its mission. The Institute supported the 2014 pro-democracy movement and protests in 2019 against a bill

that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China.

In September the High Court ruled in favour of the government's claim that the General Union of Hong Kong Speech Therapists, whose registration was revoked in 2021, had used funds to endanger national security. The court granted the government a confiscation order to seize HKD 116,000 (approximately USD 14,900) from the pro-democracy union.

LGBTI people's rights

The Hong Kong government failed to provide any meaningful updates on progress towards the implementation of a 2023 ruling by the Court of Final Appeal requiring it to provide an alternative legal framework for the recognition of same-sex partnerships.

In November the Court of Final Appeal dismissed the government's appeal against a lower court decision which gave same-sex couples who married overseas the same inheritance and public housing rights as heterosexual married couples.

According to media reports, the Hong Kong government cut funding to at least three LGBTI groups, and enforced administrative measures to obstruct fundraising and promotion activities of one of the groups.

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1. "China: Chinese director arrested for protest film: Chen Pinlin", 30 April †
 2. "China: Prominent artist arrested for his work: Gao Zhen", 5 December †
 3. China: "On my campus, I am afraid": China's Targeting of Overseas Students Stifles Rights, 13 May †
 4. "China: Activist Li Qiaochu unjustly convicted 'for speaking out about torture'", 5 February †
 5. "China: 'Malicious' conviction of #MeToo and labour activists shows Beijing's growing fear of dissent", 14 June †
 6. "China: Activists approaching one year in detention: Yu Wensheng and Xu Yan", 22 March †
 7. "China must end decade of injustice", 18 September †
 8. "What is Hong Kong's Article 23 law? 10 things you need to know", 22 March †
 9. "Hong Kong: Protest song ban a 'worrying sign' of shrinking freedoms", 8 May †