

Huge rally in Hong Kong against anti-subversion laws

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Up to half a million people marched in Hong Kong on July 1—the sixth anniversary of Britain’s handover to China—to protest against new “anti-subversion” legislation being enacted by the Beijing-installed administration of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. The National Security Bill, legislated under Article 23 of Hong Kong’s Basic Law, would effectively extend China’s police-state methods into the former British colony.

The rally was the largest since one million people took to the streets of Hong Kong on June 4, 1989, to protest against the Stalinist regime’s massacre of workers and youth in Tiananmen Square. Most of the marchers were dressed in black T-shirts to symbolise the death of democratic rights in Hong Kong. They marched through the city from Victoria Park to the downtown government buildings, bringing the city’s public transportation system to a temporarily standstill.

People carried flags and banners against Chief Executive Tung and Article 23. Slogans included, “For the sake of Hong Kong, for the sake of freedom, oppose Article 23”, “Return political power to the people!” and “We are tired, we are angry, just step down!”. More than 1,300 police were deployed.

A retired nurse told Reuters: “This [Article 23] will push Hong Kong toward an era of tyranny.” A lawyer Terry Chan commented: “The government is trying to use the law to suppress people’s views and voices.” Yan Sui-lei, a middle-aged mother, who brought her young daughter, said: “I’m not here for myself, I’m here for the next generation’s freedoms.”

In 1997, when handing power to Beijing, the British government claimed that democratic rights would be protected: the city would function as a special autonomous region of China for 50 years under the Basic Law—a local constitution. However, Beijing insisted, particularly following the Hong Kong protests against the Tiananmen Square massacre, that the Basic Law include a special clause—Article 23—to allow for new security laws.

In the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, a number of

dissidents took refuge in Hong Kong. The Beijing regime particularly wanted to crackdown on groups and individuals regarded as political threats, not only to Hong Kong but to China as a whole.

Article 23 authorised the Hong Kong government to “enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, sedition, subversion against the central government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organisations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organisations or bodies of Region from establishing ties with foreign political organisations or bodies.”

Under the National Security Bill, opposition groups and dissidents, including members of the China Democracy Party and the Falun Gong movement who found sanctuary in Hong Kong, could be specifically targetted. Anyone belonging to a group with connections to an organisation banned under Beijing’s security laws will be regarded as “endangering national security” and subject to the bill.

Clause 4 of the bill provides for a broad definition of subversion against the People’s Republic of China, including “using force or serious criminal means that seriously endangers” its stability. The charge, which carried a life-sentence, may apply to Hong Kong residents taking part in anti-Beijing protests while in another country.

The offence of sedition is just as all-encompassing. Critics have pointed out that journalists could be charged under the bill for “inciting others to engage in violent public disorder that would seriously endanger the stability” of China. The legislation declares that publications will only be considered seditious when there is “an intention to incite others” to commit treason, subversion or secession. However, what constitutes “intention” has been left vague and ill defined.

The bill gives the police extensive powers to deal with those suspected of security offences. In particular, its “emergency investigation power” enables the police to conduct house raids without a warrant.

Last week’s protest far exceeded the expectations of the organisers, who had predicted 100,000 would attend.

Moreover, while the participants were obviously outraged by the anti-democratic measures, there were broader concerns about the Tung administration and deteriorating social conditions. Like the majority of the Hong Kong legislature, Tung, a billionaire business tycoon, was not elected but was installed by Beijing.

The *Washington Post* noted: “While the protest was planned to express opposition to a proposed national security law, it turned into a forum for all sorts of grievances—from a general dislike of Tung to high unemployment rates to his bungled handling of the SARS crisis that ravaged Hong Kong for months.”

According to the Singapore-based *Straits Times*, a bus workers’ representative Mak Tak Cheng, for example, called his fellow workers to take action. “Let’s join the march to protest against the territory’s historic high jobless rate,” he declared. Other groups, including health-care workers, demanded an independent investigation into the Tung government’s handling of the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong.

The return of Hong Kong to China coincided with the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, which hit the island’s economy hard and destroyed the so-called “free-market miracle”. The collapse of the real estate bubble of the late 1990s resulted in a 65 percent fall in property prices, leaving tens of thousands of middle-class families with “negative assets” and struggling to pay off huge mortgages.

The economic problems were compounded by the SARS outbreak, which produced a sharp downturn in tourism. The city’s jobless rate has jumped to 8.2 percent, compared to 2.3 percent five years ago. Pay and conditions in the island’s large service industry have deteriorated and there are limited social security provisions. A recent survey by the Public Opinion Program of Hong Kong University found that nearly half the population expressed general dissatisfaction with present conditions—up 14 percent since March.

Commenting on last week’s protest, political scientist Paul Harris from Hong Kong’s Lingnan University told the AFP news agency: “This is phenomenal—a much, much bigger demonstration than I have seen here before... Hong Kong people can be cynical and sometimes skeptical about how much of an effect of any change they can make. Nevertheless, they have braved the heat and turned out in force to show their opposition. This is a reflection of a much wider issue—it also attacks the government. The government can’t simply ignore such outpouring of animosity. Mr Tung is clearly out of touch with reality on the ground.”

The same could be said of the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy. Just hours before the protest began, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao left the city after a short official ceremony with local officials and business leaders to mark

the sixth anniversary of the British handover. He attempted to assure the population that the new security legislation “absolutely will not affect the different rights and freedoms of Hong Kong people”. Wen is supposedly one of the “pro-democracy reformers” in the new Chinese leadership.

Both the Tung administration and Beijing were shocked by the size of last week’s protest. Initially the authorities attempted to tough out the opposition. The Beijing-backed newspaper *Wen Wei Po*, for example, denounced the march as “orchestrated by some forces with ulterior motives” and warned that it would threaten the “social stability” of Hong Kong.

Last Thursday, Hong Kong’s police chief Tsang Yam-pui threatened to outlaw a further protest timed to coincide with the final vote on the bill this Wednesday. “To besiege the legislative building and affect the legislative operation is an illegal act,” he declared. Opponents of the law, who had called for a rally to encircle the building, indicated they did not intend to blockade the meeting.

On Saturday, Tung called a press conference and backed down on three elements of the National Security Bill in an attempt to placate the opposition. The provision to outlaw groups connected to organisations banned in mainland China has been dropped, along with plans to allow police to raid houses without a warrant. Journalists who disclose government information will be able to defend themselves by saying their actions were in the public interest.

Pressure continued to mount, however, with opponents criticising the amendments as inadequate and calling for the legislation to be delayed. Yesterday, after insisting all weekend that the vote would go ahead, Tung was forced to announce that the bill would be put off until further consultation had taken place. Just hours before, one of his key allies, James Tien, chairman of the big business Liberal Party, resigned from the Executive Council and called for the legislation to be delayed.

The events of the last week have exposed just how isolated and vulnerable the Hong Kong administration is. Tung may have survived the immediate crisis but his political future is now in doubt.



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