

Hong Kong delays legislative elections amid crackdown on democratic rights

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One month after Beijing passed its new national security law for Hong Kong, authorities have stepped up their attack on democratic rights in the city, including by announcing that they would postpone September's Legislative Council (LegCo) elections for one year. Opposition activists and politicians have also been barred from running for office and some have faced arrest.

On Friday, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced she would use the 1922 British colonial-era Emergency Regulations Ordinance to delay the upcoming legislative election citing the danger posed by a resurgence in COVID-19 cases. Lam stated it was necessary to "ensure fairness and public safety and health and the need to make sure the election is held in an open, fair, and impartial manner."

Lam, whose decision was backed by Beijing's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, absurdly claimed, "This postponement is entirely made based on public safety reasons, there were no political considerations."

The number of COVID-19 cases has grown sharply in Hong Kong throughout July, including a record high 149 new patients last Thursday. Lam's assertions, however, are simply untrue. In local elections last November, the official opposition grouped around the pan-democrat bloc took control of 17 of 18 local councils, winning 390 out of 452 available seats. The opposition again hoped to capitalise on widespread anger towards the government to win a majority in the LegCo.

Prior to its postponement, Hong Kong authorities also banned 12 opposition candidates from running in the election. This included well-known activist Joshua Wong and other younger candidates. Four members of the pan-democrat Civic Party were also banned.

The authorities outlined the sweeping grounds on which candidates would be barred, effectively making any opposition illegitimate. These include: promoting Hong Kong independence, soliciting the intervention of foreign

powers, expressing opposition to the new national security law, or being deemed likely to vote against government bills to press for their demands.

On Wednesday, four students were also arrested in the first police operation under the new national security law. "Our sources and investigation show that the group recently announced on social media to set up an organization that advocates Hong Kong independence," said Li Kwai-wah of the new national security unit inside the Hong Kong police.

The four were connected to a group called Studentlocalism, which advocated Hong Kong independence before being disbanded in June. Tony Chung, a former leader of the group, was accused of "inciting secession" through a Facebook post.

Beijing is not primarily concerned about the establishment pan-democrat opposition grouping in Hong Kong but rather the potential for renewed protests against the attack on democratic rights and the deteriorating social conditions. Last summer's mass protests by legislation allowing extradition to China drew in millions of people concerned about Beijing's undermining of democratic rights and deteriorating social conditions. While the movement was hijacked by opposition parties and figures calling for the intervention of US and British imperialism, none of the underlying issues have been resolved.

Hong Kong ranks as the sixth most unequal city in the world. It is home to 64 billionaires while the broad masses struggle to survive with low paid jobs, stagnant and declining wages, widespread poverty, and lack of access to safe, affordable housing.

These conditions are replicated throughout China. In May, an estimated 80 million Chinese workers did not have employment, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and an additional 600 million workers earned just \$140 a month. Beijing ultimately fears that renewed

protests in Hong Kong will resonate with the rest of the Chinese working class and lead to an explosion of social anger, threatening the Chinese Communist Party's hold on power.

Beijing is also concerned that the United States will foster separatist sentiment in Hong Kong and also exploit the protests to ramp up its aggressive confrontation with China.

Washington's concern for democratic rights is utterly hypocritical. Even as Trump was suggesting that the US elections could be delayed, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany condemned the decision to postpone the Hong Kong election, declaring that it "undermines the democratic processes and freedoms."

In a speech on July 23, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a keynote speech that denounced the Chinese Communist Party in Cold War terms as a "tyranny" and a threat to the "free world" that had to be stopped. The condemnation of China and its police state methods comes as the Trump administration is trampling on democratic rights including through the dispatch of federal agents to violently suppress protests in Portland and other cities.

Two days prior to his speech, Pompeo was with Nathan Law, another prominent Hong Kong activist, in London at the residence of the US ambassador to the United Kingdom. Pompeo was reportedly "very keen" on meeting with Law, and discussed not only Hong Kong but also Tibet and Xinjiang where the US has also been encouraging separatist groups.

The Trump administration is not concerned about democratic rights in Hong Kong or anywhere else in China. Rather it is mounting another of its phoney "human rights" campaigns as a pretext for its escalating conflict with China.

Any fight to defend democratic and social rights in Hong Kong must involve a turn to the working class throughout China on the basis of a struggle for genuine socialism against the Beijing regime that is responsible for restoring capitalism and represents the interests of the ultra-rich oligarchy.



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