

Beijing intensifies crackdown on Hong Kong political opposition

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Three young opposition activists—Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam—were sentenced on Wednesday to jail terms after pleading guilty to trumped-up charges of organising, participating in and inciting others to take part in an unauthorised assembly last year. Wong has been jailed for 13 and a half months, Chow to 10 months, and Lam for seven months.

The sentences are part of a broader political crackdown by Beijing and its puppet administration in Hong Kong aimed at suppressing large-scale protests that have repeatedly erupted over demands for greater democratic rights. Millions took to the street last year in opposition to legislative changes to enable extradition to the Chinese mainland fearing it would be used against critics of Beijing.

Wong, Chow and Lam were charged over a protest in June 2019 outside police headquarters involving thousands of people over attempts by police to use tear gas and pepper spray to suppress the mounting demonstrations. Chief Executive Carrie Lam was eventually forced to put the extradition legislation on hold but mass protests continued, driven by wider concerns about the lack of democratic rights.

Wong, Chow and Lam were prominent members of a political organisation, Demosist?, established in the wake of the so-called umbrella protest movement in 2014 demanding democratic elections for Hong Kong's top post of chief executive. Currently, the position is "elected" by a body stacked with pro-Beijing appointees. Demosist? was one of a number of organisations formed by young people disaffected with the timid manoeuvring of the pan-democrat opposition grouping in the territory's Legislative Council.

Demosist? was disbanded after Beijing rammed a sweeping new national security law covering Hong

Kong through the Standing Committee of its National People's Congress in June. The legislation covers four broad areas—subversion, secession, terrorism and colluding with foreign forces—and can be used to intimidate and suppress political opposition with penalties up to and including life imprisonment. The law also provided for the establishment of an "Office for Safeguarding National Security" in the city and for some cases to be tried by Beijing's judicial system.

More than 20 people have been arrested under the national security law, including Agnes Chow and Jimmy Lai, who is the wealthy proprietor of the prominent anti-Beijing newspaper *Apple Daily*. He and two senior managers of his media group were arrested on Wednesday on charges of alleged fraud. Unlike the two managers, Lai was not released on bail.

Beijing justified its national security law by claiming it was necessary to counter "foreign forces" who were responsible for the protest movements in Hong Kong. While the US has attempted to exploit the anti-Beijing opposition in Hong Kong and figures like Lai are well connected in Washington, the scope of protests reflects broad fears about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime's heavy-handed approach to any opposition.

Hong Kong was returned to China by Britain in 1997 under the "one country, two systems" schema that supposedly protected the limited democratic rights that had existed under British colonial rule and would extend them in the future. The chief concern of Britain and China was to preserve the well-established corporate framework under which the city became a hub for investment in the Chinese mainland.

The real fear in Beijing is that the massive protests that have repeatedly erupted will trigger similar movements on a far broader scale throughout China. In particular, under conditions of a slowing economy and

deteriorating social conditions, the CCP is desperate to prevent social unrest in the Chinese working class. Rather than orienting to Chinese workers, and a unified struggle against the Beijing regime, organisations such as Demosist? have promoted a parochial Hong Kong outlook and made futile appeals to Washington and London.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued an utterly hypocritical statement following the sentencing of Wong, Chow and Lam on Wednesday, declaring that the US was “appalled by the Hong Kong government’s political persecution” of the activists. Pompeo is part of the Trump administration that has had no compunction about sending federal paramilitary police to brutally crack down on protests against police violence and continue to try to overturn the result of the 2020 election.

Like every US “human rights” campaign, Pompeo’s posturing about democratic rights in Hong Kong serves the economic and strategic interests of American imperialism. The Trump administration has systematically ratcheted up the US-led economic and strategic confrontation with China, and has used the issue of “human rights,” not only in Hong Kong, but Xinjiang and Tibet, to encourage separatist movements and to weaken China.

Beijing in turn has exploited US propaganda to justify its police-state methods. The jailing of Wong, Chow and Lam is just the latest step in the CCP’s efforts to stamp out open political opposition in Hong Kong.

Last month the National People’s Congress standing committee gave the Hong Kong administration the right to disqualify members of the Legislative Council who promoted independence for Hong Kong, refused to recognise Chinese sovereignty or called for foreign intervention. The measures were condemned by critics who branded them as a “patriot test.”

Four lawmakers—Kwok Ka-ki, Alvin Yeung, Dennis Kwok and Kenneth Leung—were disqualified. Opposition legislators resigned en masse to demonstrate their support for the four and opposition to Beijing’s actions. Just two of the remaining 43 legislators in the 70-member Legislative Council are considered not pro-Beijing. One of those who resigned, Claudia Mo, told the BBC: “They’re lining us up to oust us bit by bit. What’s the point of staying on like this, thinking will I be ousted today or not?”

Beijing through its state-owned media and the Hong Kong administration is increasing the pressure on the courts, educational institutions and the city’s media to toe the line. A number of opposition activists have fled into exile. This week, one of the lawmakers, Ted Hui, who resigned last month, announced that he was seeking refuge in Britain after fleeing to Denmark earlier in the week. Another 12 activists have been detained in mainland China since August after being caught attempting to leave by boat.

More than 10,000 people have been arrested since the protests erupted last year against the extradition laws and 2,325 have been prosecuted on charges including rioting, unlawful assembly and assault. One account, citing police records, indicated that as of the end of October, 372 people have been convicted and 77 acquitted.



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