

# Beijing set to impose a new, anti-democratic election law on Hong Kong

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China's National People's Congress (NPC) is set to confirm a new law for Hong Kong that will drastically alter the city's electoral process. Since large-scale protests erupted in 2019, Beijing has enacted a number of anti-democratic measures to rein in any opposition in the city. The central government hopes to silence demands for increased democratic rights in order to prevent a larger eruption of discontent in the working class in Hong Kong and on the mainland.

The NPC will formally reveal the new law on Thursday when its session concludes. The changes include expanding the number of seats in Hong Kong's legislature, known as the Legislative Council (LegCo) from 70 to 90, but reducing the proportion of directly elected representatives from 50 to 20 percent. Until now, the other half of the LegCo's membership has been elected from so-called functional constituencies, narrowly representing various professions and industries and favouring establishment figures with ties to Beijing.

In addition, anyone wishing to stand for election to the LegCo would have to be chosen by the same election committee that selects the chief executive, the local leader of Hong Kong. Beijing uses this method to ensure the chief executive is loyal to the central government. It has also been the source of frustration and anger for Hong Kongers, including during the 2019 protests, as demonstrators demanded the right to directly elect the top government executive.

In addition to covering elections for the chief executive and the LegCo, the new law will apply to candidates running for local district councils. In November 2019 district elections, pro-Beijing candidates were heavily defeated, with the official opposition pan-democrats securing 390 out of 452 seats.

Beijing has justified the new law saying only Chinese "patriots" should be able to run for office. Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, stated on Sunday, "Loyalty to the motherland is a basic political ethic of all public office holders and aspirants anywhere in the world—Hong Kong is no exception."

Since the start of the protest movement in 2019, Beijing has denounced "outside forces," namely the United States and the United Kingdom, for stoking the demonstrations while accusing the pan-democrat legislators of collaboration with the US and UK. While many within the pan-democrats have ties to Washington and London, Beijing's accusations were aimed at discrediting the legitimate demands of broad layers of protesters for democratic rights as well as to distract from the underlying social and economic inequality driving mass discontent.

While the current election legislation is aimed at restricting the pan-democrats access to political office, it is a direct attack on the democratic rights of the population.

Beijing has also enacted a number of new laws and measures to clamp down on political opposition in the city. This includes the national security law enacted last summer outlawing "sedition" and other forms of anti-government speech. In January, 47 activists were rounded up in police raids and charged under the new law on February 28. They face lengthy prison sentences if convicted. LegCo elections were delayed last July as Beijing feared a similar trouncing of its candidates as in the previous district elections.

The pan-democrat bloc, however, does not represent a progressive way forward for Hong Kong workers and youth. They represent a section of the political and economic elite in Hong Kong, with some, like the flagship Democratic Party, seeking accommodation

with Beijing. Others attempt to appear radical or even anti-capitalist in order to prevent youth and workers from breaking with the pan-democrats and capitalism as a whole.

When workers started to move into open struggle in the summer of 2019, the pan-democrats worked to sow confusion by painting the struggle as Hong Kong versus the mainland, as well as generating illusions that Washington or London would defend democratic rights. Like the pro-Beijing faction in Hong Kong, the pan-democrats are hostile to the broader democratic social demands of students and workers. Achieving these demands necessarily requires a break with capitalism and the realization of socialism, which both Beijing and the pan-democrats oppose.

Beijing's concern is not the pan-democrats themselves, but that any criticism of Beijing and the misnamed Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will fuel broader social discontent in Hong Kong and on the mainland. The Chinese ruling elite's greatest fear is that the Chinese working class enters into a united and independent struggle to assert its own political interests against capitalist exploitation.

At the same time, Beijing is not indifferent to the machinations of Washington. President Joe Biden and his administration in Washington are continuing in the footsteps of his predecessors Barack Obama and Donald Trump, further ramping up military and economic pressure on China.

On Friday, State Department spokesperson Ned Price denounced the election law, saying, "These are a direct attack on Hong Kong's autonomy, Hong Kong's freedoms, and the democratic processes, limiting participation, reducing democratic representation, and stifling political debate in order to defy the clear will of the people of Hong Kong and to deny their voice in their own government and governance."

The US is exploiting the situation in Hong Kong, as well as other regions like Xinjiang and Taiwan, in an effort to surround and isolate China. Biden is also pushing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, between the US, Australia, India, and Japan, which amounts to a military alliance against China. The leaders of the four countries are due to hold their first joint meeting this week.

Last Wednesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken called China the "only country with the economic,

diplomatic, military and technological power to seriously challenge" the US. He evoked Hong Kong as well as Xinjiang to justify the continued military build-up against China.

US imperialism has for decades exploited "human rights" to justify regime change operations and wars to further its interests, while maintaining close ties with autocratic regimes. Now it is preparing for war with China which it regards as the chief threat to its global hegemony. Washington is desperate to arrest its own relative economic decline in relation to China, especially as the US economy falters in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.



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