Under China’s Thumb

Hong Kong’s Struggle for Democracy Amidst the New Cold War

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On June 30, Beijing passed national security laws that criminalize dissent in Hong Kong to put an end to the city’s yearlong protest movement. Touted by the pro-Beijing Hong Kong government as a means to restore peace and revitalize the city’s economy, these laws are a clear infringement on Hongkongers’ political freedom. They are designed to put an end not only to the ongoing movement, but to the “One Country, Two Systems” agreement that, for the past few decades, has safeguarded the territory’s autonomy from Beijing.

CHINA CRIMINALIZES HONG KONG’S FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY

Whereas the anti-extradition bill movement since June 2019 had seen a series of brutal crackdowns on protesters at the hands of a militarized police force unabashedly empowered by the Hong Kong government, the national security laws enacted a year later ushered in an even more exhaustive agenda of suppression that far exceeds anything we have seen so far. The four main areas of persecution–secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign or external forces–not only stamp out virtually all types of anti-establishment action, but also preempt any form of resistance and critique in media, scholarship, cultural production, and beyond.

Overnight, the passing of the laws made a series of long harbored fears a reality. Such blanket criminalization is only exacerbated by the alarmingly global reach of the laws. Regardless of citizenship or location, anyone and everyone can be punished under the global purview of the CCP’s new national security measures, upon entering the borders of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The law’s sweeping scope is no accident in light of the defeat of the anti-extradition bill. While the 2019 protests may have succeeded in striking down the transport of offending individuals to mainland China’s opaque and unaccountable criminal justice system, the CCP’s response has simply been to export its mechanisms of control toward nothing short of the entire world, rendering the problem of extradition entirely moot in turn.

As a result, the amorphous boundaries of the laws will likely ensnare activists in the diaspora and those involved in advancing the international front of the movement. Detractors to the legitimacy of the CCP would be hard-pressed to find assurances of safe passage home nor guarantees that family and friends would stay out of harm’s way.

This is hardly Hong Kong’s first brush with the CCP’s autocratic behavior in constitutional matters. It is not even the first national security bill the Hong Kong government tried to shoehorn into law; the fierce pushback against Article 23 in 2003 is still fresh in many minds. The administration’s failure to set the security law in stone then has paved the way to the gross violation of One Country, Two Systems today.

Amidst a global wave of tyrannical legislation from the Philippines and Indonesia to Hong Kong and the US, administrative and executive powers are being unreservedly expanded with impunity under manufactured conditions of emergency and flimsy conflations of activism with terrorism. Across these sites, police continue to play a crucial role in shielding the interests of the capitalist elite and exact extraordinary violence upon those deemed threats to the governing order.

Hong Kong is of course no exception. Under the national security laws, new police units will reportedly...
collaborate with a special Beijing-led commission to grow the force’s power to gather intelligence and
investigate suspects. In further extension of its colonial origins, police will be given free rein to
commandeer special detention facilities once operated by British security forces and police in the 60s.

The ongoing protests’ jaw-dropping numbers of arrest, with many slapped with riot charges that carry a
lengthy 10-year prison sentence, have resigned Hongkongers to the fact that a full-blown generation of
political prisoners will have been borne of the struggle. But the national security laws, wielded by a police
force operating at an even higher capacity to eliminate dissent, can now put people away for life in an
emboldened carceral state. With much more to lose now than ever before, the “sixth demand” to abolish
the police articulated in the 2019 uprising has only become all the more pressing.

UNDERMINING HONG KONG AS A BASE FOR CHINESE ACTIVISM

While the national security laws are set to alter political life in Hong Kong as we know it, its impact will
also be felt by Chinese activists who, for decades, have looked to Hong Kong as a safe haven as well as the
Chinese labor movement that has been supported by labor nonprofits in Hong Kong.

Dating back to the time of the Qing dynasty, Hong Kong has had a long tradition of supporting labor,
social justice, and even revolutionary movements in mainland China. Dr Sun Yat-sen once used Hong Kong
as a base as he fought to overthrow the Qing dynasty. Dissidents from mainland China fled to Hong Kong
after the Tiananmen Massacre.

Ironically, even the late CCP Premier Zhou Enlai, who, during the battle against the then ruling
Kuomintang, retreated to Hong Kong after contracting malaria and needing a safe location to recover.
With the new national security laws in place, Hong Kong will be no safer than any other city in China.

Hong Kong has also been the longtime home to many non-profit organizations that have supported the
Chinese labor movement. This includes Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM)
that brings together students, scholars, and labor activists to challenge corporate behavior and advocate
for workers’ rights in China; China Labor Bulletin (CLB) which tirelessly documents the labor
developments in their ambitious archival projects; and, Globalization Monitor whose advocacy for
(mainland Chinese) worker rights have also extended to migrant and environmental justice.

While it’s still too early to say what the national security laws will mean for these organizations, their
work in supporting labor organizations and, in some cases, inciting strike actions can easily be portrayed
as seditious, and hence risky to continue doing. Financially supporting movements in the mainland may
even be considered terrorist activity, which could result in much harsher punishment from the state. This
could mean cutting off international labor organizations from, arguably, the single largest body of workers
in the world.

“This kind of brutal repression by the CCP has taken place in the mainland for many years now. Many have
been jailed without a fair court hearing. Some have even been tortured into obedience. In fact, Chinese
activists are so frequently harassed by the police that the euphemism for it—“to be invited by the police
for tea”—is now well known by the Chinese public.

Under the new laws that criminalize dissent, Hong Kong-based activists and the non-profit organizations
that have supported the Chinese labor movement are now in the same boat as mainland dissidents. For
Hongkongers, this means their struggle is now intimately tied with those of mainland China. Thus, so is
their liberation.

BEIJING’S NEW APPROACH TO FOREIGN POLICY
Xi’s imposition of the law is a sign of the regime’s increasing willingness to project its power, regardless of opposition from US empire. In 1990, against the backdrop of the US’ unparalleled global might, China’s paramount leader Deng Xiaoping set the tone of China’s attitude towards foreign policy: “Keep a low profile, hide your strengths, and bide your time.” As he opened China to a globalizing world that was hungry for cheap labor, he knew that the only way for China’s economy to prosper was for it to appear unthreatening to other global powers.

Beijing’s enactment of the national security laws marks a decisive departure from Deng’s ethos of hide and bide. Indeed, with the world watching over Hong Kong’s movement, President Xi Jinping was fully aware of the international attention that such laws would attract but proceeded to forcefully push them through anyway. As such, the new laws are not just about quelling dissent in Hong Kong. Rather, they represent a shift in Beijing’s confidence and a declaration that—after all these years—China has indeed bided its time.

In the past, Chinese leaders never brazenly encroached on Hong Kong’s autonomy because they knew that the city was the primary connection between China and global capital, and that its stability was critical for the Chinese economy. In the 80s under his directive to open and reform, Deng anticipated the economic value that Hong Kong would bring to the mainland. So, when it came to negotiating the terms of Hong Kong’s return to China, he vouched for the territory to retain its capitalist system, hence creating the One Country, Two Systems agreement. Hong Kong’s destiny as China’s door to global capital was set.

Today, China keeps several doors to global capital open. Chinese cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen have risen into economic hubs in their own right, complete with their own stock exchanges. The tech industry has swollen into a force that allows the Chinese consumer to almost entirely bypass traditional financial institutions; the advent of mobile payments have by and large made traditional banking obsolete, displacing Hong Kong’s role as a financial hub.

Xi’s ambitious global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, has spun a web of debt relations across the world in which Chinese firms have been extracting raw materials and exploiting inexpensive labor in association with local capitalists under a revived “Silk Road” model. Meanwhile, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA) megapolitan program is set to integrate no less than 11 cities in the Pearl River Delta into a tech and innovation conglomerate to rival Silicon Valley.

Where Hong Kong once represented over 25% of the Chinese economy, that number has come down to barely 3% in 2020. These advances in China mean that Hong Kong’s value as a conduit of global capital has become much less exceptional.

In this context, the passage of the laws—despite the US Senate’s immediate response to pass a bill to sanction China—is an indication of Xi’s confidence in China’s international position. Knowing that the laws could instigate an exodus of Hong Kong-based American companies (of which there are thousands) and result in economic backlash from the US, Xi is ready to sacrifice Hong Kong’s economic usefulness if it means getting his way politically. So far, foreign companies and investment have not left the city and Hong Kong’s market seems to be back on the rise.

While it’s still too early to tell what the mid-to-long term economic effects will be, Xi’s bet seems to be holding out. China has swiftly recovered from the COVID-19 outbreak while the US continues to mishandle the crisis, which has caused the international community to lose confidence in US leadership. Xi knows that, at least for now, the cards are stacked in his favor.

COLD WAR REDUX

Just as Beijing has justified its aggressive stance toward the US under the banner of anti-imperialism, we can expect that Washington will reframe China’s rise as a question of freedom versus authoritarianism, especially as domestic failures in the US produce the need to scapegoat China. International foreign policy has already splintered along the fault lines of the Cold War redux, where countries in opposition to the laws face off against those that have rallied around China’s supposed position of anti-Western
imperialism. This latest installment of a protracted tit-for-tat battle has only dialed up the stakes of inter-imperial rivalry.

That the clash of strongman politics between the US and China merely greases the wheels of an increasingly bifurcated world will go overlooked in the sordid game of inter-imperial competition. The political right will buy into this; conservatives have and will come down hard on Hong Kong’s national security laws using the righteous rhetoric of human rights advocacy and will portray China’s rise as an existential threat to American society.

Many on the left will counter this by praising the CCP for championing socialism while turning a blind eye to the fact that it actually facilitates capitalism with authoritarian characteristics. In fact, some quarters of the left have decried Hongkongers’ resistance to the new laws as more attempts to restore the territory’s capitalist status quo and harken back to colonial governance. Some have even embraced the laws as the Chinese state’s move toward decolonization.

“Though the calls for a general strike have largely fallen flat, the surge in unionization since 2019 has made possible a nascent synthesis of political resistance and labor organizing at a scale that is unforeseen in Hong Kong.”

As US-China tensions worsen, Hong Kong will only be more deeply entangled in this geopolitical contest. This has pushed many Hongkongers to adopt a principle of mutually assured destruction—“if we burn, you burn with us.” In lieu of forming cross-border anti-authoritarian coalitions with militant grassroots movements, the international front of the Hong Kong movement has relied on pleas to governments and state-level provocations in the form of bipartisan sanctions.

Though they have been of dubious effect in salvaging what is left of the territory’s deteriorating autonomy, a vocal contingent of the movement has long advocated the decline of Hong Kong’s economic clout and political distinction from mainland China by deliberately stoking the fire of the US-China trade war along this logic: the faster the fall of Hong Kong, the more imminent China’s own collapse. In other words, Hong Kong’s position as a bargaining chip in the tug-of-war between superpowers has not dampened Hongkongers’ readiness so much as stiffened their resolve for their own annihilation.

But as proponents of this accelerationist ideal grimly prepare to jettison the region’s economic position as leverage, fanning the flames of US-China clashes will likely end up in more devastation for precarious communities and the working class instead.

Of course, any critique of the CCP’s security practices from the US immediately reeks of hypocrisy. Whether it is the citing of “terrorist activity” in Hong Kong’s new laws or the repression of the Uyghur Muslims under the pretext of anti-terrorism, such draconian measures are only possible following the precedent set by the US’ War on Terror and its by-now transnational paradigm of Islamophobic persecution.

Trump’s most recent “Executive Order on Hong Kong Normalization” has brought to light the close collaboration between the US State Department and Hong Kong police for over a decade, casting significant doubt on the unfounded and racist accusations that the US has paid to keep insurgency alive in the territory. That the US government has authorized the sale of military equipment to Hong Kong since the British colonial era only demonstrates further how absurd the charge of “foreign collusion” is under the new laws.

Furthermore, the laws depend as much on the mutual reinforcement of securitization between the US and Chinese empires. While the ongoing abuse of Uyghur Muslims shows just how far the CCP is willing to push the perimeters of its ethnonationalist and settler colonial project, these structures of mass surveillance and policing are also enmeshed with US tech firms and research institutions, whose steady stream of capital investment, expertise and skilled personnel have made it that much easier for the security state to profit from the large-scale implementation of advanced disciplinary technologies.
With these networks of reciprocity, both the US and China have at their disposal an elaborate suite of punitive technologies fit for the consolidation of authority in the name of national security.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR HONG KONG?

The struggle in Hong Kong has no doubt been dealt a crushing blow but giving in to the collision of nationalisms and ceding ground to adversarial geopolitics will merely deepen the crisis and allow the US to weaponize the fate of Hongkongers in a bid to ramp up antagonistic tactics on the international stage of power. Nevertheless, Hong Kong leftists have continued to push back on this binary logic.

Rather than re-entrench Hong Kong’s vulnerable position within Cold War formations, they have called for internationalist alignments against the rise of right-wing authoritarians everywhere through the exchange of organizing experiences and direct action tactics. In fact, there are still numerous avenues of resistance to pursue.

Exceeding optimistic projections, over 600,000 Hongkongers came out in force to vote in the opposition primaries to determine the pro-democracy candidates ahead of the September Legislative Council elections. The significance of the huge turnout cannot be overstated under the current climate of terror.

In fact, Hong Kong police raided the office of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, the city’s pre-eminent independent pollster, on the eve of the primaries on spurious grounds of cybersecurity and data privacy in a transparent attempt to intimidate voters. Top government officials have even warned that involvement in the primaries would constitute illegal activity in light of the security laws; the Liaison Office condemned the primaries as tainted by foreign interests and a flagrant attempt to manipulate the September vote.

Undeterred, hundreds of thousands poured into polling stations across the city in hopes of winning the democrats’ first majority since the 1997 handover. This is largely considered the last opportunity for democratic participation before the window to political transformation closes forever. Despite the limitations of the elections—the legislature is rigged by the corporate dominated “functional constituencies” in service of state capital—voters are gunning to secure the numbers necessary to veto the government budget that is slated to boost police funding by US$3.3 billion and ensure a marked increase in manpower and crowd control gear.

Hong Kong’s budding labor movement is another front to watch in this new phase of struggle. Though the calls for a general strike have largely fallen flat, the surge in unionization since 2019 has made possible a nascent synthesis of political resistance and labor organizing at a scale that is unforeseen in Hong Kong. Many of the city’s industries have long been bereft of even the most rudimentary labor protections, without which rampant exploitation and overwork have become a tolerated norm.

Those who fall through the cracks into debt and unemployment are forced to grapple with tepid social welfare provisions that entrap the most indigent within a pool of cheap, disposable labor. Under a government that will continue to attune itself to only the whims of free-wheeling capital, exerting political pressure via economic means and industrial action will help the movement gain new traction.

Indeed, as workers in Hong Kong begin to adopt the base-building techniques and infrastructure of labor organizing to strengthen their political platform, organized labor may prove to be an indispensable source of sustained resistance.

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