

'Alarmed and outraged': Over 200 scholars criticise prosecution of Hong Kong pro-democracy leaders

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Over 200 scholars from local and overseas universities have signed a joint statement criticising the prosecution of Hong Kong activists for their leadership role in the 2014 pro-democracy Occupy protests.

"We are alarmed and outraged," the statement read. "We strongly oppose the Hong Kong government's decision to charge these scholars and activists for their non-violent fight to realize Hong Kong people's right to universal suffrage."

"These criminal prosecutions against peaceful academics and citizens have immense chilling effects on the international and local academia, students and the youth, in addition to inflicting permanent damage to Hong Kong's reputation as a free and open society."

The statement was signed by more than 90 scholars from overseas institutions in countries such as the USA, Canada, Japan, Singapore and Spain. The president of the Hertie School of Governance in Germany, Professor Helmut Anheier, was among those who spoke up.

At the time of publication, 100 scholars from local universities have also signed the document.

The campaign was in response to a recent police crackdown on Occupy leaders. Nine leaders are facing different charges of public nuisance, while local media cited sources as saying that as many as 39 figures involved in the protests will soon face similar charges.

The leaders will appear at the Eastern Magistrates' Courts on May 25. The court will then send the cases for trial either at the District Court without a jury, or at the High Court, where jurors will be present.

The common law offence of public nuisance carries a maximum penalty of seven years behind bars.

Sociology professor Chan Kin-man, one of those targeted, said earlier that he and two other founders of the movement will not plead guilty to the charges of inciting others to create a public nuisance because it is an archaic charge "based on the backward assumption that those incited do not have a free will."

Some have taken to social media to voice support for the leaders by expressing willingness to testify in court that it was Beijing and the Hong Kong authorities that "incited" them to take part in the demonstrations, not the protest leaders.

International human rights watchdogs such as Amnesty International Hong Kong and Freedom House have condemned the prosecutions. U.S. Senator Marco Rubio has also urged the Hong Kong

government to take “meaningful steps” to answer Hongkongers’ demands for full democracy.

The Hong Kong government calls the Occupy protests an “illegal movement.”

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