

# Hong Kong has banned a political party but it will never crush desire for independence

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## **Banning groups that want democracy will only inspire and radicalise a new generation**

After months of high-level condemnation, the government has [banned the Hong Kong National party](#) on the grounds that its pro-independence stance poses a threat to national security. It is the first time a political organisation has been outlawed in the former British colony since its return to Chinese rule in 1997.

But if the government thinks this will crush pro-independence sentiment among the city's discontented youth, it would be quite wrong. On the contrary, this will only mark the beginning of a much tougher task of exterminating what the authorities see as subversive "pro-independence forces".

Examples abound in history that show that political repression doesn't always successfully stamp out opposition, and in many cases even fuels radicalism and insurgency.

In Hong Kong's case, pro-independence sentiments were seen as an outlandish political idea few would entertain until 2014, when hopes for democracy were dashed after the Chinese government refused to grant an unfettered vote. When a mass 79-day civil disobedience campaign - later known as the umbrella movement - failed to put pressure authorities to give in to their democratic demands, frustration and helplessness radicalised many young people.

Since then, there has been a proliferation of loosely organised groups advocating for independence or self-determination as young people figured out that [Hong Kong](#) would have no hope of democracy so long as it remains under Chinese rule. The government has been quick to move to put down their political aspirations.

The danger is that their resentment and simmering anger could just boil over at some point and spark more unrest

Andy Chan Ho-tin, then 25, founded the Hong Kong National party in March 2016 and tried to run in the legislature's elections later that year, but was disqualified because he refused to declare that Hong Kong was "an inalienable part of China".

Another candidate, Edward Leung Tin-kei, then 25, was also disqualified even though he officially dropped his pro-independence stance.

Two years on, Chan's party has been banned for allegedly endangering national security. Leung was jailed for six years over his involvement in a 2016 street riot dubbed the fishball revolution.

On the surface, the government's action against independence advocates seems rather successful. An opinion poll last year suggested that the percentage of Hong Kong residents supporting

independence fell from 17.4% in 2016 to 11.4% in 2017. The number of young people aged between 15 and 24 who support independence fell even more sharply: from 39.2% to 14.8%.

As freedom of speech continues to shrink in Hong Kong, with the looming enactment of a “subversion law”, and social media remarks perceived as “inciting others to commit illegal acts” open to prosecution, many dare not openly challenge China’s sovereignty.

But the authorities would be wrong to be complacent, because discontent and the sense of alienation from [China](#) continues to deepen. A survey in 2017 indicated that as many as one in three in Hong Kong wanted to emigrate. An opinion poll in June this year showed that only 2.9% of local young people aged between 18 and 29 identify themselves as Chinese and 3.6% as broadly Chinese - a huge drop from 16.5% and 31.6%, respectively, in August 1997 - one month after the handover, when the poll first started.

Has the independence campaign really disappeared? Activists say the movement has simply gone underground. In September last year, three huge black banners bearing the words “Hong Kong Independence” mysteriously emerged overnight on a university campus. More pro-independence posters appeared across university campuses in the city in following days.

But even as the government continues to shut out voices of dissent and crush young people’s democratic aspirations, their longing for political rights is unlikely to be suppressed. The danger is that their resentment and simmering anger could just boil over at some point and spark more unrest.

When the government bans groups, banishes young people with a “heretical” agenda from entering politics and bars public discussions, it is shutting down legitimate channels for rational discussion.

While more advocates of Hong Kong independence are barred from expressing their views or sent to jail, they are being made into modern-day martyrs, poised to inspire and radicalise another generation of young people.

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