

Hong Kong University to Fire Law Professor Who Inspired Protests

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Benny Tai was convicted of public nuisance charges related to his leading role in the 2014 pro-democracy Umbrella Movement.

HONG KONG — The University of Hong Kong's governing body voted on Tuesday to fire an associate law professor who was convicted last year of charges related to his leading role in the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests and has remained a key figure in the city's pro-democracy movement.

The legal scholar, Benny Tai, was [convicted of public nuisance charges last year](#) and [sentenced to 16 months in prison](#), but he was released and remains on bail while his case is under appeal.

The university had faced widespread calls from members of the pro-Beijing establishment to dismiss Mr. Tai. But his supporters argued that dismissing him would undermine academic freedom that has already been imperiled by a new national security law imposed by Beijing.

The decision "marks the end of academic freedom in Hong Kong," Mr. Tai [said in a Facebook post](#). "Academic staff in education institutions in Hong Kong are no longer free to make controversial statements to the general public about politically or socially controversial matters."

Last year the university began an investigation into Mr. Tai that led to Tuesday's decision by the school's council, a body dominated by members from outside the university. Arthur Li, its chair, is also an adviser to Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's chief executive.

The university's senate, which is comprised largely of academic staff, found earlier this month that Mr. Tai's conduct did not warrant his removal. The council rejected that recommendation, a move that Mr. Tai's supporters called politically motivated.

"Arthur Li has completed his political mission, and Benny Tai has become a martyr to civil disobedience," [said Joseph Chan](#), a political science professor at the university. "The University of Hong Kong has sacrificed its reputation and it will not be able to hold its head high in the international academic community. This day will become a major stain in the history of the University of Hong Kong that cannot be washed away."

Lei Tsz Shing, an undergraduate representative of the university's council, said in an opinion article on Tuesday that Mr. Tai's termination would contradict messages that academic freedom would be maintained under the national security law.

"If the university at this moment ignores the senate's recommendations and fires Benny Tai, it would be equivalent to declaring that academic freedom is being repressed," [he wrote on Tuesday in The Stand News](#), an online outlet.

The Hong Kong University Students' Union had argued that Mr. Tai should not be dismissed, calling him a model scholar who was willing to put his knowledge into action.

"He has impressed on generations of students the responsibility of a public intellectual, with his genuine care of society and unwavering pursuit of universal suffrage," [the group wrote in a statement on Facebook](#).

Mr. Tai was a central figure in the 2014 Umbrella Movement, calling for a protest to push for more direct democracy in Hong Kong. What he had envisioned as a sit-in of a few days was pre-empted by student demonstrators who occupied a square near government headquarters.

Thousands took to the streets after police used pepper spray and tear gas on the protesters. They occupied major roadways in the city for 79 days, but ultimately failed to change how Hong Kong chooses its leaders.

He was convicted last year of conspiracy to commit public nuisance and incitement to commit public nuisance. The judge rejected the argument made on behalf of Mr. Tai and eight other defendants that the protests were an appropriate exercise of free speech.

Shiu Ka-chun, a Legislative Council member who was one of the eight other activists convicted along with Mr. Tai last year, said he was told Monday that Hong Kong Baptist University was not renewing his contract to teach social work.

After his conviction, Mr. Tai has remained active in politics, and this year helped organize a primary vote among the pro-democracy camp to choose candidates for a legislative election in September. More than 600,000 people participated, despite government warnings the exercise might be illegal under the new national security law. The turnout was an early indication of broad support for the opposition camp.

The primary was denounced both by Hong Kong government and Beijing's representatives in the city, who singled out Mr. Tai for vehement criticism.

"Facts have proven that Benny Tai and his like are the chief culprits for creating the chaotic situation in Hong Kong, bringing disaster to Hong Kong and harming its people," [Beijing's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office said](#) after the primary earlier this month.

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New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/world/asia/benny-tai-hong-kong-university.html?smid=tw-share>