

'Hong Kong is crumbling': seven days that crushed city's last resistance

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Dozens of pro-democracy politicians and activists have been rounded up, charged and denied bail in fresh crackdown on opposition to China

The phones rang on Friday, one month earlier than expected. More than 50 pro-democracy politicians and activists across [Hong Kong](#) received a call from the authorities: they were to report to police on Sunday.

Expecting to be charged and held for lengthy jail terms, many spent the weekend making last-minute preparations. They picked out books to take into custody, arranged for pets to be taken care of, said goodbye to their loved ones. Tiffany Yuen, 27, spent the day at home, where she was photographed [cuddling a Buzz Lightyear toy](#), before visiting constituents in Tin Wan.

"When the police called, I knew it's bad news," said one, who spent most of the weekend quietly hugging his child. "I probably won't be able to hold my kid for some years. I said: 'You might not see daddy for several years. You have to be brave and look after mummy.'"

"I never thought things would come to this," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity, fearing his comments would be used as further evidence against him under the national security law. The legislation, introduced in Hong Kong in June, penalises acts seen by the authorities as subversion, secession, collusion with foreign forces or terrorism with up to life in prison.

"I don't know what sort of One Country Two Systems this is," he said, referring to the policy meant to uphold Hong Kong's freedoms and rights under Chinese rule after the 1997 handover of sovereignty.

"Now, even the mildest forms of opposition – chanting slogans and wearing certain colour masks – are seen as a potential breaches of national security law," he said. "The red line is constantly shifting – we feel very insecure."

In a dawn raid on 6 January that sent shock waves across Hong Kong, 55 Hong Kong pro-democracy figures, from former lawmakers, local district councillors to young campaigners and activists, were arrested over primary polls held last year. The sweeping police crackdown marked the single biggest operation conducted under the controversial national security law Beijing imposed on Hong Kong last year.

On Sunday, Hong Kong police charged 47 of them with conspiracy to commit subversion, and held them in custody before they appeared in court on Monday. Prosecutors alleged they had schemed to select candidates who could win a majority of the 70 legislative council seats in an election – subsequently postponed by the government – and then to indiscriminately block legislation to "paralyse" parliament and force the resignation of the chief executive.

They were detained in custody, appearing in marathon bail hearings that ran for most of the week. Some [fainted from fatigue](#) while others complained they were not able to change clothes for several days.

To show their eligibility for bail, some of the most prominent political figures announced their departure from their democratic political party. On Thursday, [the judge denied bail to 32](#). As of Friday, 11 out of the 15 granted bail remained in custody pending the government's immediate appeal. Those refused bail included veteran politicians Claudia Mo, Eddie Chu and Gary Fan, who were often criticised by younger activists as being too moderate.

The judge barred the media from reporting on arguments made by either side at the bail hearing, during which the defendants made speeches that drove families and even journalists to tears.

Accused of "conspiring to subvert state power", the 47 face terms up to life imprisonment if convicted. The eight who have not been charged so far – including American lawyer John Clancey, pro-democracy legislators James To and Roy Kwong – had their bail extended to 4 May.

The operation leaves nearly every key voice of dissent in Hong Kong now in custody or jail.

The sudden detentions came a few days after Xia Baolong, the head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, said those who "opposed China and caused chaos in Hong Kong" should be banished from public office. Xia said at a high-level symposium on Feb 22 that the "extremely vicious ones", including detained Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai, law academic Benny Tai and jailed activist Joshua Wong, should also be "severely punished," according to a transcript published by the Beijing-backed Bauhinia magazine. Chinese officials also stressed that the new laws would ensure that only "patriots" could govern Hong Kong.

The speed and the magnitude of the crackdown on the pro-democracy camp has shocked even the most experienced politicians. Many had anticipated that the national security law would initially only target those involved in violent protests, or advocates of independence and believed China would tolerate some pro-democracy politicians for the sake of window-dressing.

"It was a big surprise to be charged with subversion," said 79-year-old American lawyer John Clancey, who came to Hong Kong over 50 years ago as a Catholic priest. "I never foresaw this."

"Obviously they are saying clearly they only want patriotic people to govern Hong Kong, ... they want to rule out anyone from the democratic camp," said Clancey, who was the first foreign national detained under a sweeping national security law. He was serving as the treasurer for Power of Democracy, an organiser of the primaries.

'A free and safe city is degenerating'

Since the imposition of the national security law, the authorities have stoked pressure on the judiciary, media, schools and universities and the civil society at large, including churches and NGOs, as Beijing-backed media increasingly lashed out on judges, professors, school teachers and church pastors seen as pro-democracy.

Emily Lau, a veteran politician and former chair of the Democratic Party, lamented the muting of voices of dissent in the city that once prides itself as a bastion of freedoms in the region.

"The Hong Kong as we know it is crumbling before our very eyes," Lau said. "It is disheartening to see a once vibrant, free and safe city degenerating into its current state."

“Beijing may decide to snuff out the dissenting voices, but that would be a big mistake. Allowing different voices in Hong Kong is a part of the city’s strength and shows Beijing is willing to tolerate opposing views.”

As the National People’s Congress convened its annual meeting in Beijing this week, officials say a key focus is the overhauling of Hong Kong’s electoral system to ensure the city is governed by “patriots”.

Kenneth Chan, a political science professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, said the crackdown would send the message to the world that “the ‘One Country, Two Systems’ policy has been prematurely terminated.”

“There is no limit to a populist authoritarian drive for ‘political purity’ to bring the city under total subjugation,” he said.

“We have now ‘show trials’ to make the democrats examples of how the party-state fights and struggles with the enemies ... To “legalize” the political struggle is the Leninist legal tradition, whereby the law is viewed by the Chinese Government as a mere tool to facilitate the Party agenda,” he said, citing party edicts that stress that “to implement the law is to implement the will of the party.”

“The message to the world is that Beijing will not succumb to pressure from the Western coalition about human rights violations in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet etc,” said Willy Lam, an adjunct professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, many still brave prosecution by protesting outside the courtroom this week, chanting “Give us justice!” amid heavy police presence.

“You can’t live in fear ... I wouldn’t stop working because of fear,” said Clancey. “In perfect love, there is no fear.”

Guardian reporter

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