

Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF) confirms it has disbanded as members steer clear amid police investigation

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The umbrella group, which has been behind some of the largest protests in city history, says it has no one willing to work for its secretariat in the coming year.

The front has been under police investigation since April, with authorities questioning it over its finances and role in a declaration submitted to the UN.

The pro-opposition umbrella group behind some of the largest mass protests in Hong Kong's history announced in a statement on Sunday 15 that it had disbanded amid a looming police crackdown. The 19-year-old Civil Human Rights Front said it was forced to close, as no members were willing to take part in the work of its secretariat in the coming year.

"Over the past year, the government, in the name of the Covid-19 pandemic, has turned down the protest applications by the front and different organisations. Many of our member groups are under oppression, with civil society being placed under unprecedented tough challenges," the group said in its statement.

The front said that while it had originally hoped to continue its fight, its secretariat had failed to keep up its operations after the group's convenor, Figo Chan Ho-wun, was imprisoned. Chan was jailed for 18 months in May over an unauthorised 2019 protest.

"We have no choice but to announce our dissolution, as we have no members participating in the secretariat in the next term," it said, adding the group had already directed its trustee to donate its HK\$1.6 million (US\$205,563) in assets it owned to *"suitable bodies"*.

In the statement, the front also expressed gratitude to Hongkongers for marching with it over the past 19 years, from its history-making 2003 rally against previous national security legislation, through the Occupy movement of 2014, and up to the 2019 anti-government protests, triggered by a now-withdrawn extradition bill.

"Our calls resonated across the entire city. We let the world see Hong Kong, let the light shine in the darkness, and let democracy and freedom take root in people's hearts," it said. *"Although the front no longer exists today, we believe different organisations will continue to uphold their beliefs and support civil society, without forgetting why they started."*

The front's dissolution came less than a week after the Professional Teachers' Union (PTU), the largest for any single profession in the city, similarly announced its disbandment amid political pressure, dealing yet another blow to the city's embattled opposition since Beijing's imposition of a new national security law on the city last June.

The front had remained mum as to its fate following an internal meeting on Friday 15, but said on Sunday that the decision to disband was made then.

Police chief Raymond Siu Chak-ye told pro-Beijing media last week that the front could have violated the national security law as it had hosted a series of unlawful assemblies in recent years. He warned that police had gathered evidence and could take action against *"unlawful groups"* at any

time.

A source familiar with the central government's thinking also previously told the Post that the force would go after the front regardless of its dissolution, as Beijing was "*determined*" to rein in pro-opposition groups, which it viewed as a threat to the city's stability.

Joshua Rosenzweig, head of Amnesty International's China team, said the front's dissolution, coming so soon after the closure of the PTU, signalled a "*concerning domino effect*" in Hong Kong. "*Hong Kong's draconian national security law has triggered an accelerating disappearance of independent civil society groups from the city,*" he said. "*The [front] has organised, often in close collaboration with the police, large-scale peaceful rallies in Hong Kong for 20 years without being accused of breaking any law. Its demise is yet more evidence that Hongkongers' rights to freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly can no longer be taken for granted under the authorities' obsession with 'national security'.*"

Rosenzweig urged the Hong Kong authorities to respect and guarantee the rights of all people to associate freely.

Founded in 2002, the front was composed of human rights and pro-democracy groups. Its July 1 march in 2003 saw an estimated 500,000 people take to the streets, forcing the government to shelve previous national security legislation then being considered under Article 23 of the Basic Law.

It also organised several record-breaking demonstrations during the 2019 anti-government protests, including ones on June 9 and June 16 that were attended by an estimated 1 million and 2 million people, respectively. Police, however, put the figures far lower, at 240,000 and 338,000, respectively.

At its height, the front had more than 40 member groups, including the Democratic, Labour and Civic parties. But many groups began jumping ship in March after reports emerged that police were investigating the front under the current national security law.

Its membership has since dwindled to just 10 groups, including the Social Workers' General Union, the League of Social Democrats and the Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, the organiser of the city's annual June 4 candlelight vigil marking the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

Police have been investigating the legality of the front's operations since April.

The force questioned the group over its finances and reasons for failing to register with the government under the Societies Ordinance. It also demanded an explanation for the front's role in a joint declaration submitted to the United Nations last December calling for an international investigation into alleged police brutality during the 2019 social unrest, a move pro-establishment figures said might have violated the national security law.

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3145093/hong-kong-protests-civil-human-rights-front-confirms-it>