

Pro-democracy activist and law professor Benny Tai fired from University of Hong Kong

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‘End of academic freedom’: University of Hong Kong to fire pro-democracy activist and law prof. Benny Tai

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by Rachel Wong (HKFP)

Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Benny Tai is to be fired for misconduct by the University of Hong Kong (HKU), where he is currently serving as an associate law professor.

The HKU Council < <https://hongkongfp.com/hku-council-debacle/>> voted 18 to 2 on Tuesday 27 in favour of removing the Umbrella Movement leader from the law faculty.

Undergraduate representative of the council Nathaniel Lei told the press after the meeting that he was enraged by the decision: *“It was a blatant trampling of academic freedom and the autonomy of the university.”*

Tai, 56, has been teaching at the law faculty since 1991. Along with sociology professor Chan Kin-man and reverend Chu Yiu-ming, he was a co-founder of the Occupy Central with Love and Peace campaign, which led to the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests, where demonstrators occupied main roads near the government headquarters for 79 days.

Last August, he was convicted of conspiracy and incitement to commit public nuisance and was released from jail <

<https://hongkongfp.com/2019/08/15/jailed-hong-kong-umbrella-movement-leader-benny-tai-released-bail-pending-appeal/>> pending appeal last August.

‘End of academic freedom’

Responding to the decision, Tai told journalists that it was not made by the university, but by *“an authority beyond the University through its agents.”*

“It marks the end of academic freedom in Hong Kong. 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. Academic institutions in Hong Kong cannot protect their members from internal and outside [interference].”

He said he was grateful to HKU and *“heart-broken”* to witness its demise: *“I will continue my research and teaching on the rule of law in another capacity. My fight for Hong Kong’s rule of law also will not stop. I have the confidence to see the rebirth of a free HKU in the future.”*

Nathaniel Lei told the press that, if Tai wins his appeal against his criminal conviction, the council decision may be reviewed. He added that HKU Vice- chancellor Zhang Xiang did not cast a vote in

the meeting.

HKU Student Union President Edy Jeh condemned the council decision. She said there would be follow-up action, including a petition advocating reform of the council, as she said its composition might have led to decisions that favour members own interests: *"I believe that the council made this decision out of political concerns."*

HKU Council is the governing and management body of the university and its members include six members who are appointed by the institution's chancellor – Hong Kong's chief executive. It also includes six public trustees appointed by the Council who are not employed by HKU, several teachers, one undergraduate and one postgraduate student.

Last year, the Committee of Enquiry into Possible Good Cause under the HKU Senate ruled that there was not sufficient reason to dismiss Tai upon investigation into complaints made against him. It is not the first time the ruling body has been in the spotlight. The HKU Council's rejection of former law dean Johannes Chan's appointment prompted uproar in 2015 <<https://hongkongfp.com>> . The Council has previously denied <<https://hongkongfp.com/2018/01/10/beijings-liaison-office-hong-kong-not-interfere-university-affairs-says-hku-council-chiefarthur-li/>> that Beijing interferes in its affairs.

P.S.

<https://hongkongfp.com/2020/07/28/breaking-hong-kong-university-to-fire-pro-democracy-activist-and-law-prof-benny-tai-source/>>