

Now Macau's pro-democracy politicians face a Hong Kong-style crackdown

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"The purge is more complete here than in Hong Kong," says veteran legislator Au Kam-san.

After almost 30 years as one of Macau's token few pro-democracy lawmakers, Ng Kuok-cheong finally faces the end of the road – barred from standing in the casino city's upcoming legislative election in September.

Announced last Friday, the Macau electoral commission's sweeping decision to **remove all 21 pro-democracy contenders** from the race came without warning.

They were deemed ineligible because they had allegedly failed to uphold the Basic Law and bear allegiance to Macau, Hong Kong's sister Special Administrative Region of China, based on evidence presented by police.

Macau electoral officials who made the announcement did not give details of the evidence. The legislative hopefuls, from six electoral tickets, were notified of their disqualification on Friday.

Ng Kuok-cheong

"We are 100 per cent confident to say that we did not violate any requirements under electoral laws, and 100 per cent confident that [we] did not have any action or evidence showing that we did not support the Macau SAR and the Basic Law," Ng told HKFP in an interview.

He is a leading pro-democracy politician from the group Iniciativa de Desenvolvimento Comunitário de Macau.

"Of course, if this is a forceful political decision, there will be no effective appeal," Ng said. "If it was not a forceful political decision but was bureaucratic manoeuvring [by Macau officials], we are fully confident that we'll be able to explain ourselves."

However, while the lawmaker and his running mates seek to appeal the decision, he declined to comment on whether it was politically motivated. The candidates submitted their objection to the Electoral Affairs Commission on Monday and may take the case to the Court of Final Appeal if necessary, Ng said. The court's decision would be announced by August 2.

"I'd imagine that this is of course related to the situation in Hong Kong, as [disqualifications] are common there, and with the national security law, suppression became stronger," Ng said.

As Hong Kong and Macau affairs are managed by the same officials from the central government, *"it is no surprise that their approach [to the two cities] appears identical."*

Au Kam-san

Another veteran pro-democracy lawmaker and Ng's longtime partner Au Kam-san, who did not enter this year's race, said he was *"shocked"* that the candidates had been disqualified.

Au has been a lawmaker in Macau since 2001, two years after the former Portuguese colony was handed back to China. He had planned on retiring from the legislature and focusing on community work after his current term ends.

"[I] never imagined that this would happen in Macau," Au said of the disqualifications. The city has experienced little or none of the political turmoil and unrest that gripped Hong Kong in recent years.

Contrary to Macau, Au said, Hong Kong had seen a host of legislative changes including a national security law enacted by Beijing and a sweeping overhaul of the electoral system before the disqualification and potential removal of candidates and other politicians.

"Even though we do not accept it, there indeed have been changes [in Hong Kong]," he said. *"But in Macau, there has been no change to the law. Simply speaking, it was from the perspective of legal interpretation that what wasn't an issue in the past suddenly was interpreted as 'evidence proving that [the candidates] did not support the Basic Law or did not swear allegiance to the SAR',"* Au said.

All of the disqualified candidates have signed declarations of allegiance to the Macau SAR and to the Basic Law. They include not only candidates who advocate democracy, but also those from unions belonging to the city's liberal factions. *"If all liberals are disqualified... the legislature will be purged of all opposition voices,"* Au said.

Traditionally, there have only been two or three pro-democracy or liberal candidates among the Macau legislative assembly's 14 directly-elected seats. The rest of the 33 seats are indirectly elected or appointed.

Unnecessary purge

The pro-democracy camp in Macau did not have much support from the people, Au said. There were, he said, already *"fires in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong, it is not necessary to start another one in Macau."*

Au said opposition voices in the Macanese legislature had been *"extremely weak"* but now, with the prospect of none at all, *"it is equal to scrapping the legislature."*

Hong Kong's Beijing-imposed political changes have severely reduced the number of directly elected seats and placed major obstacles in the path of pan-democrat candidates. Yet there have been media reports that authorities would like at least a few democrats to stand.

"The [Macau] situation may be more dire than Hong Kong... Carrie Lam may wish people like Frederick Fung to join the election and be in the legislature as proof that 'we allow democrats in the election'," Au said. *"The purge is more complete here than in Hong Kong."*

P.S.

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