

Hong Kong mass arrests – Xi Jinping strikes while Western powers are in disarray

Via [China Worker](#)

Mass arrests of democratic opposition under China's national security law

ISA reporters in Hong Kong

The latest sweeping crackdown by the Chinese dictatorship (CCP) in Hong Kong effectively bans political opposition in the city. The fragile 'democracy' that has existed in Hong Kong as an exception among Chinese cities is in every practical sense extinguished.



53 Hong Kong opposition activists and politicians – from liberal pan-democrats to right-wing localists (Hong Kong nationalists) – were arrested on 6 January for alleged “subversion of state power” under the national security law enacted by China last year. The highest penalty for this crime is life imprisonment. On the same day police also raided the

offices of three opposition media groups indicating that they too could be prosecuted under the national security law.

New Cold War

The precise timing of this latest crackdown, which was not completely unexpected, is linked to global events. The regime of Xi Jinping is engaged in an epoch-making Cold War struggle with the US over which capitalist superpower will dominate the 21st century. Xi does not expect this conflict to moderate under the incoming Biden administration and has therefore executed a number of radical diplomatic moves in recent weeks to exploit the power vacuum in US politics and the distraction of the global pandemic. The China-EU investment deal concluded just one week ago is an example of this, with both China and the EU under German leadership moving to strike a deal quickly rather than wait for Biden to take office and exert more pressure on the EU not to sign.

Chinese dissident cartoonist Badiucuo was one of many to make this connection in a tweet: "Without European Union assurance to Beijing recently, there won't be today's HK massive arrest on 50+ pro-democracy figures."

According to the police, the 53 were arrested for their participation in the pan-democratic primary election held last July, to select candidates for the subsequently cancelled Legco (Legislative Council) election in September 2020. Those arrested include almost all former pan-democratic legislators, including left-wing grassroots representative 'Long Hair' Leung Kwok-hung of the League of Social Democrats.

Others are jailed activist Joshua Wong and the organizer of the primaries, ex-professor Benny Tai, as well as every candidate who took part in these primaries. The 2020 Legco election was postponed for one year ostensibly because of the pandemic. In reality, the regime merely needed a pretext to put off the elections and it is possible they will be delayed

again. A rump Legco comprised only of pro-regime representatives continues its sessions. Only when the CCP is sure the Legco can be reorganized without any 'troublesome' oppositionists will it allow elections to be held.

"Without European Union assurance to Beijing recently, there won't be today's HK massive arrest on 50+ pro-democracy figures." – Badiucao

The government claims that the 53, by virtue of participating in the primary election, were "conspiring" to bring down the Chief Executive by trying to gain a Legco majority and then veto the government budget. Since its inception the Legco has been a toothless rigged parliament and its only real power is the ability to veto government proposals in rare instances.

"Lam chau"

The electoral strategy of the pan-democrats which is now held to be 'subversion' – i.e. coordinating to win a majority – also borrowed terminology from the protesters in the 2019 mass movement: the idea of "mutually assured destruction" (*lam chau* in Cantonese). This idea became popular during the mass struggle as protesters sought out a strategy that could answer how the people of a single city could win against the world's biggest and economically strongest dictatorship.

'*Lam Chau*', like many ideas that surfaced during the mass struggle, was vague and open to several different interpretations, none of which really answered the fundamental problem because, of course, there is no possibility to win a battle of that character so long as a mass movement remains confined to one city or locality and does not seek to spread to the whole country.

Many of the young Legco candidates from a localist or pro-US liberal background featured the "mutually assured destruction" doctrine in their campaigns for the primaries. Their

particular version meant advocating measures to paralyse the economy of Hong Kong in support of US and Western sanctions, with a Legco majority used to veto all proposals from the CCP-appointed government and in this way prevent it from functioning.

Socialists would have many political and tactical differences with this approach, while at the same time we completely reject the grounds for these arrests.

What this means

These mass arrests mean the days of a legal political opposition are over. This heavy-handed repression means the dictatorship will not back off unless there is a movement much more powerful even than in 2019. A movement in Hong Kong alone will not suffice. Hong Kong could be the 'spark' but any successful movement must also draw its support from the mass of workers and youth in mainland China.

The regime's move is an attempt to kill off the entire Hong Kong opposition in one single blow. It hopes that by 'decapitating' the pan-democratic parties it will be able to impose stability in Hong Kong. However, this is a very short-sighted view. The current dictatorship does not understand that there was a reason why the British colonial regime (1841-1997) created the Legco, and also a reason why the Chinese rulers didn't simply dismantle it when they took over sovereignty 24 years ago.

This pseudo-parliament acted as a political 'safety valve' to some extent for the extreme class and social tensions that exist in Hong Kong, which is one of the most unequal societies on the planet. Unemployment doubled last year rising to the highest level in 16 years. Workers and low-income families have borne a heavy burden during the pandemic, which has increased anger against the government, reaching record levels of unpopularity. The number of poor people (living on less

than 500 euro per month) has risen to over 20 percent of the population while Hong Kong's billionaires saw their combined fortunes swell by 19 percent (a gain of US\$60 billion) in 2020.

The CCP's previous strategy in Hong Kong used to be a step-by-step approach to destroy the democratic opposition, sometimes described as a "boiling frog syndrome". But now they are dramatically speeding up the process. Particularly after the heroic mass struggle of 2019, which enjoyed huge mass support and contained some revolutionary features despite its political limitations, Xi Jinping cannot tolerate any further opposition that would damage his authority and 'strongman' image.

Fear of elections

In the November 2019 District Council elections, which were held during the mass upheaval, the CCP badly misjudged things. They believed the movement was largely exhausted and that the pro-Beijing camp would get a significant victory. But in fact the opposition won almost 90 percent of the seats. Similarly, the over 600,000 votes cast in last year's primaries as a protest vote – coming just days after the national security law was enacted – took the dictatorship by surprise and made it extremely worried. 600,000 votes is a very big turnout in an unofficial election exercise – over a quarter of the total electorate. The CCP therefore worries that future Legco elections could turn into referendums against the government, which could boost mass morale and even reignite a mass movement.

The mass arrests mean that the next Legco elections in Hong Kong, whenever Beijing decides to allow them, will be completely rigged with the main opposition candidates in prison, exile, or otherwise disqualified. Most likely only a loyal opposition will be allowed to participate, and still there can be many bureaucratic measures to block unwanted

candidates. The government may also abolish the five citywide 'super-seats', a semi-concession to the democracy movement that was granted in 2010. Again, they fear that the contests for these seats could be turned into referenda against the government.



Arrested under the national security law: Leung Kwok-hung ('Long Hair') speaking at a refugee protest organised by Socialist Action.

It is not sure that Legco elections will be allowed this September. The Hong Kong government may postpone again, fearing that any election campaign by the opposition could turn into rally points for a new mass movement. In a parallel development, Beijing may also want to take the opportunity to purge and replace its existing support parties in Hong Kong, realising they are incompetent and ineffective in carrying out its orders. A new revamped pro-Beijing force could put the CCP more firmly in control. This shows once again that the dictatorship is no longer satisfied with ruling indirectly

through puppet forces in Hong Kong and prefers direct control.

EU betrays workers... again

Xi's regime has acted with cold calculation, exploiting a window of opportunity that exists before Biden is sworn in, with the US paralysed by an unprecedented crisis. The mass arrests in Hong Kong came just one week after the dictatorship signed a major investment deal with the European Union (EU). A reported sticking point in the talks was China's suppression of trade unions and use of forced labour in the Muslim-majority Xinjiang region but also at factories in other parts of China – this includes factories that supply a number of multinational companies like Apple and Nike.

Finally, EU leaders with Germany's Angela Merkel in the driving seat, approved the deal anyway. The single laughable 'concession' Xi's negotiators made on this score was that China will "make continued and sustained efforts" to ratify ILO conventions on forced labour. This once again shows the hypocrisy of Western capitalist governments when it comes to repression in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and other parts of China. Their only concern is the profits and business interests of their own corporations.

How strong is Xi's hand?

The ruthlessness and calculation shown by Xi's regime on the world stage and in Hong Kong does not really indicate strength and confidence. It equally reveals a degree of desperation and a sense of urgency. The aim is to project strength as a signal that China is unruffled by the Cold War policies of Trump (and soon Biden). But equally as important the regime is anxious to deter internal challenges from Chinese workers and youth, and from within the CCP-state where Xi's rule has become more and more
unpopular.



Badiuca0 cartoon

The dictatorship wants to send a strong message to the masses, especially the youth in mainland China who are increasingly sympathetic to the movement in Hong Kong and are now becoming radicalized by the economic crisis. While the mass arrests are a further serious blow to the mass movement, the Hong Kong and Chinese governments will not achieve a period of stability through these policies. Mass discontent due to the mismanagement of the pandemic and the economic crisis – especially China's debt crisis – will still escalate.

Hong Kong's Legco has played a role as a platform for political debate and even for mobilizing mass protests in some cases, although the liberal pan-democratic leaders have always generally tried to limit and avoid mass struggle. It has also been used to control the scope of political debate and direct popular anger into limited legal reforms and discussion over technicalities. The mass movement will lose an important focus in the short term but – such are the contradictions of Xi's

repressive policies – in the long run the political debate will be forced outside the channels controlled by the capitalist establishment and become more radicalized.

The pan-democratic leaders actually played little to no role in the 2019 mass protests; in fact their main contribution was to spread illusions in Western imperialism as a 'democratic' counterweight to Chinese imperialism. As there are no real organizations with membership structures among these parties, their main influence has been derived from their Legco seats. Many of these parties will struggle to continue. This shows there is a more urgent need to build a mass left and working class alternative with democratic structures to face up to the challenge of fighting the dictatorship and Hong Kong's pro-CCP capitalist class.

In the longer run Xi Jinping's ultra-repressive control measures will only weaken capitalism in Hong Kong and the CCP itself. These policies are stoking a future social and political explosion in Hong Kong and in China. Workers and youth in Hong Kong need to reflect on the tough lessons of the last years of struggle. Western capitalist governments will no more assist the fight for democratic rights in Hong Kong than they will assist workers in China to organise in now outlawed trade unions. These rights will only be won through mass struggle and much more quickly and surely if the struggle unites workers in Hong Kong, China and throughout the region.