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Hong Kong Purges Mention of Tiananmen Square

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After nearly two years of repression the Chinese government has effectively destroyed the Hong Kong “system.” What Beijing once promised would be “one country, two systems” has become “one country, one system,” thoroughly Chinese and oppressive.

Today any act of resistance or word of criticism of either the Beijing leadership or its local agents can be punished with prison time. The educational system has been turned into a communist-propaganda program. Hong Kong even asserts the right to punish people anywhere on earth who threaten its “national security,” broadly defined. Which theoretically could include my writing this article.

Officials hope to keep Western businesses in what has been long rated the world’s economically freest jurisdiction while dispensing with Western freedoms. As *Nikkei Asia* noted, guarantees of the rule of law are “why companies, from the mainland and overseas alike, made the city one of Asia’s premier corporate hubs. Even under the security law and a crackdown that has seen more than 190 democracy activists, former lawmakers, business people and others arrested, there was hope that the established legal system would preserve basic tenets like the presumption of innocence, the right to bail and trials without undue delay.”

Despite claims of the Chinese Communist Party’s local factotums that all remains well, however, *Nikkei Asia* found broad concern over “a gradual erosion” in judicial independence. And businesses are not exempt from prosecution, since anything, including collecting or using economic information, can be criminalized. Legal scholar Alvin Cheung explained that “there’s no end of things that can be brought under the rubric of national security... particularly under the Hong Kong legislation and under what we know of the mainland conception of national security.”

A dramatic demonstration of the political nature of the National Security Law, imposed on June 30, 2020, is how it has deployed to eliminate any mention of the June 1989 Tiananmen Square massacres. The onetime British colony demonstrated its distinction from the Chinese mainland by regularly commemorating the brutal crackdown on democracy advocates. Originally organized by students, the Tiananmen Square demonstrations spread across the country—and the protests were joined by workers and others frustrated with CCP rule.

The movement threatened the survival of the People's Republic of China, or at least its communist-led regime. The episode was a close-run affair that could have produced a much more liberal political order. Indeed, happenstance—for instance, the initial absence of liberal party chief Zhao Ziyang, who was on a tragically timed trip to North Korea—aided the forces of repression, led by Deng Xiaoping, who had orchestrated China's economic opening. To thwart the popular challenge the military, at the party's order, killed hundreds or, more likely, thousands of protestors, and the CCP purged millions of democracy advocates across the country. One of the most powerful symbols of the government's brutal response was "Tank Man," the unidentified individual who briefly faced down a column of tanks.

Subsequently, the party also made the murderous crackdown disappear from Chinese history. According to CNN:

Authorities in mainland China have always done their best to erase all memory of the massacre: Censoring news reports, scrubbing mentions from the internet, arresting and chasing into exile the organizers of the protests, and keeping the relatives of those who died under tight surveillance. As a result, generations of mainland Chinese have grown up without knowledge of the events of June 4.

Hong Kong then was a British colony, however, in which freedom of speech was protected. Residents marked the incident in many ways. Even after the 1997 turnover to the PRC, the Chinese government respected civil liberties in the so-called special administrative region. Perhaps the most important commemoration of the bloody events was the annual anniversary vigil. As CNN reported:

For decades it was a symbol of freedom on Chinese controlled soil: every June 4, come rain or shine, tens of thousands of people would descend on Victoria Park in Hong Kong to commemorate the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. The atmosphere would be at once defiant and somber. Speakers would demand accountability from the Chinese Communist Party for ordering the bloody military crackdown that cost the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of unarmed pro-democracy protesters on that fateful day in Beijing. In memory of the dead, at 8 p.m. every year the park would turn into a sea of candles, held high by people vowing never to forget.

No longer. This year, the nominal government, reduced to local CCP agents, closed parts of Victoria Park, where the Tiananmen Square demonstration was held. The authorities threatened to punish anyone who organized an unauthorized protest. A half dozen people were arrested. Added CNN: "Asked whether people there could be arrested for carrying flowers or wearing black, the color of protest in Hong Kong, [Senior Superintendent Liauw Ka Kei] said those who appeared to incite others to join unlawful assemblies would be stopped and searched, and reiterated illegal assembly carries a five-year maximum jail term, while those found guilty of incitement could receive up to 12-months. The police will also target online incitement to gather, Liauw said."

Not only has the rally been prohibited, but any and all activism connected to the memory of Tiananmen Square has been eradicated. In Hong Kong, like the mainland, reports on the brutal CCP crackdown on intellectuals, bourgeoisie, and proletariat have simply disappeared. For instance, a year ago, the local authorities used a licensing complaint to force the closure of the June 4 Museum, which commemorated the 1989 events.

The Hong Kong Alliance, which ran the facility and organized the annual rally, took its exhibits online and scaled back its operations, but that did not save the group. Last September the CCP's local enforcers arrested four of the organization's board members. The charge? They were agents "of foreign forces." Then the national-security police raided the (closed) museum, seizing exhibits, like the replica of the "Goddess of Democracy," apparently as evidence. The museum's holdings have not been seen since.

Two months later, the University of Hong Kong removed the "Pillar of Shame" sculpture, which depicted a column of corpses to mark the massacre. The art was on display since 1998. The school explained that its "decision on the aged statue was based on external legal advice and risk assessment for the best interest of the university." As in, the threat of prosecution.

Of course, neither Carrie Lam, the disreputable CCP shill who leaves office at the end of the month, nor John Lee, the long-time security administrator installed by Beijing through a sham election to be Hong Kong's next leader, will formally ban political criticism. However, the National Security Law's ambiguity is its greatest strength. The ruling regime can punish literally anything by claiming that it threatens "national security."

Indeed, when the authorities were asked about the legality of organizing a rally commemorating Tiananmen Square, the official response was delivered in most-brilliant bureaucratese, simultaneously anodyne and threatening: "freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are not absolute, and can be subject to restrictions prescribed by law that are necessary for, amongst other reasons, protection of national security, public order or public health." Moreover, the officials added, people must obey "the National Security Law, the Public Order Ordinance and the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance." Finally, they noted that prosecution would depend on both circumstances and evidence.

Similarly, when asked if demanding an end to "one-party rule" violated the NSL, Lam appeared to enjoy the prospect of jailing her critics, explaining that interpretation of the law was effectively up to her government, not an independent judicial process. And there is little doubt what the former would decide. She said: "The meaning of the slogan depends on the circumstance under which the slogan was uttered. [If] it contravened any provision in the existing laws, law enforcement agencies would gather evidence; the justice department would study whether charges could be laid... and the courts would make the final judgment."

Liberal and free Hong Kong is dead. This sad end likely was always inevitable, since communists will be communists. After Tiananmen Square, the CCP committed itself to

holding power at any price, irrespective of the horrors that would be visited on the Chinese people. Beijing had to agree to the “two-systems” model to win British assent for a peaceful transfer. However, a Hong Kong that offered its people Western freedoms always would be an embarrassment and threat to the PRC’s message. When Xi Jinping, committed to ruthless personal and party rule, took over, the territory’s fate was sealed.

Among the freedoms lost is the right to commemorate Tiananmen. That requires the rest of the world to remind people of the violent political principles upon which the PRC was established. This year, some 40 cities around the world hosted vigils and rallies commemorating the 1989 tragedy. Upon us rests responsibility for keeping the memory of Tiananmen Square alive.

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