



The Tragedy of Liberty Lost in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's future is no longer in the hands of its people.

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Hong Kong is seeking to recover its leading financial role on the global stage. The last few years — filled with angry demonstrations, draconian COVID rules, and brutal Chinese repression — have not been good to the traditional economic hub. Rivals like Singapore have gained substantial ground.

In response, John Lee, the Chinese Communist Party's anointed frontman in the Special Administrative Region (SAR), launched "a campaign to convince the world that despite Covid-19 and a brutal security crackdown, the Chinese territory is not only open for business but remains Asia's premier financial center." Chinese President Xi Jinping reinforced Lee's message, citing the importance of Hong Kong's prosperity and promising to promote the "one country, two systems" model.

However, even Lee's government seems unconvinced about the persuasiveness of its appeal. Last fall, it launched an expensive initiative to attract "top talent" to boost the economy. Hong Kong also offered half a million free airplane tickets to restart tourism. However, even if people visit, how many will want to stay? Roughly 157,000 people, many of whom are young professionals, left in the first quarter of last year alone.

There remain some important differences in the level of government control between China and Hong Kong, such as an open internet. However, such differences are decreasing and exist only at Beijing's sufferance. Recent history suggests that those policies are destined for China's political trash bin.

As a colony under Great Britain and, initially, a Special Administrative Region under China, Hong Kong remained remarkably free, though formally undemocratic. In 1997, the United Kingdom and China agreed to the territory's transfer, after which the city would be governed under the "one country, two systems" standard for 50 years. At the time, many Hong Kongers doubted that China would keep its commitment. However, some returned after China appeared to be respecting the SAR's political and legal autonomy. Even during the turbulent 2010s, there was hope that Beijing's financial interests would cause it to preserve Hong Kong's status.

The SAR was a Chinese anomaly then, with vibrant politics, a free press, rule of law, civil liberties, and economic freedom. It was home to international corporations and NGOs alike. Alas, that eventually changed. In the CCP's view, what looked to most people like a safe and prosperous city was a dangerous jungle overrun by seditious and criminal operatives — some as young as 15 — who filled newspapers, universities, websites, law firms, churches, schools, museums, NGOs, political parties, civic associations, and more, plotting all manner of evil activity.

So in 2020, Beijing ruthlessly drafted, imposed, interpreted, and administered a new National Security Law, which treats most dissenting opinions — and especially criticism of the government and the CCP — as a dire threat to national security. When it comes to interpreting that term, the Hong Kong authorities mimic Humpty Dumpty, who famously declared that a word “means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

Scores of democracy activists were charged under a variety of old and new legal provisions, often for alleged offenses going back years. Those found guilty — almost everyone charged — faced years in prison. In recent months, the Lee regime charged 47 politicians, elected officials, and activists with subversion for being politicians — namely, for running a primary. “Political power must be in the hands of patriots,” Xi Jinping insisted, with patriotism defined as adopting a permanent forehead-to-floor kowtow toward Beijing.

Hong Kong arrested 65-year-old democracy activist Elizabeth Tang for foreign collusion, imprisoned three organizers of an annual vigil marking the Tiananmen Square massacre, arrested six people for selling pro-democracy books, and only allowed the first legal demonstrations under the National Security Law with extraordinary restrictions.

Prosecutions continue for crimes allegedly committed years ago, including one for a journalist who searched public records as part of a police documentary and another for Jimmy Lai, former *Apple Daily* publisher. Another of Lai's trials has been postponed to later this year, as Lee presses his Beijing bosses for permission to prevent Lai from using British counsel. The National People's Congress agreed that it was Lee's — rather than the court's — decision.

Alas, prison is not the only penalty for defying the CCP. Nearly 500 people have been sent to a reeducation program to “enhance their sense of national identity” — that is, of Xi's totalitarian China. Hong Kong refused to release the brainwashing, *er*, instructional materials used. Beijing continues to kill off the traditional British liberties that were supposed to be preserved under the transfer agreement from Great Britain.

Even though there are no loopholes, Lee is pushing to add a special Hong Kong security law. The law even applies overseas. Last month, the vigilant national security guardians arrested a Hong Kong student for her social media posts while studying in Japan. Nothing, no matter how small, escapes Commandant Lee's attention! Hong Kong has charged at least one American under the law for his activities in the U.S.

Today, Lee and his minions would have us believe that the SAR has been largely cleansed, with most dangerous criminals either imprisoned or driven abroad. Alas, the professed peace achieved by Hong Kong is that of the grave in terms of political and civil liberties.

Hong Kong's commercial character remains, but the SAR is becoming more Chinese, with the PRC playing an increasing economic role. Moreover, irrespective of nationality, businesses no longer can trust commercial rules. As the Atlantic Council writes:

Over the past three years in Hong Kong, a system based upon legal and institutional restrictions on government action founded on the Basic Law and British common law has shifted toward a system governed by political norms reinforced by the National Security Law.

Unfortunately, there is little that the U.S. can do. War is not an option — there is no conceivable security issue at stake. More sanctions also would be ineffective, given the stakes involved for Beijing, which will readily sacrifice economic gain to retain political control.

Hong Kong's future is no longer in its people's hands. Frustrated democrats could only watch last fall's flurry of mainland protests and hope for more. Regime change in Beijing, though unlikely, may be the main hope for a freer Hong Kong. Ultimately, its future will depend on the Chinese people gaining the kind of freedom that Hong Kongers once enjoyed.

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