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Hearing on
**The Status of Democracy and Human Rights in Hong Kong, Five Years After the PRC's Judicial
Takeover**

July 22, 2025



I became an activist as Hong Kong's historic pro-democracy movement began, during which I experienced firsthand the erosion of our rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association. I fought back and became a target of the government, forcing me to flee and return to the United States (U.S.). My personal story is one that reflects the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s systematic dismantling of Hong Kong's democracy and human rights.

The Collapse of Rights and Freedoms

The PRC's implementation of the widely criticized National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong in 2020 imposed harsh restrictions on Hongkongers' exercise of freedoms—ones that the Hong Kong authorities were obligated to protect under the city's Basic Law. Over the past five years, the world has witnessed the NSL being systematically weaponized to suppress dissent, erode civil liberties, and dismantle the city's once vibrant civil society.

We see the erosion of Hong Kong's freedom of expression. The forced closure of Apple Daily and Stand News, once bastions of independent journalism, sent shockwaves through the city's media landscape. Editors, writers, and publishers, including the 77-year-old Jimmy Lai, have been persecuted and jailed under the draconian NSL simply for publishing dissent¹. The chilling effect is absolute: today, self-censorship is the norm in Hong Kong.

Freedom of assembly, too, has been eradicated. For thirty years, Hong Kong was the only place under PRC rule where June Fourth candlelight vigils in commemoration of victims of the Tiananmen Massacre were allowed. Since 2020, the vigils have been banned, and lighting a candle is now a criminalized act. What was once a symbol of remembrance is now treated as subversion².

¹ "Hong Kong: Prisoner of Conscience Jimmy Lai Must Be Released as National Security Trial Resumes." Amnesty International, December 6, 2024.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/hong-kong-prisoner-of-conscience-jimmy-lai-must-be-released-as-national-security-trial-resumes/>.

² "Hong Kong: Overturning of Chow Hang-Tung Tiananmen Acquittal Another Blow to Rule of Law." Amnesty International, January 31, 2024.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/01/hong-kong-overturning-of-chow-hang-tung-tiananmen-acquittal-another-blow-to-rule-of-law/>.



And then there's freedom of association, which has collapsed under the weight of repression. Last month, the League of Social Democrats, the city's last functioning pro-democracy party, was forcibly disbanded. Over 90 labor unions, churches, student organizations, and community associations have been dissolved or intimidated into silence³. What remains is a city where forming a group, voicing a view, or holding a sign can land you in prison for up to ten years or even for life.

To further diminish the already-limited political space, the Hong Kong Legislative Council passed the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (NSO or Article 23) in March 2024, creating new national security offenses and increasing penalties for existing charges. It granted the Hong Kong government sweeping enforcement powers under the PRC's broad and vague definitions of "national security" and "state secrets," which encompass almost any conduct or information⁴.

Following the adoption of the NSO, at least 15 people were arrested under its sedition provisions, with four subsequently charged. In September 2024, three were convicted and sentenced to prison terms of between 10 and 14 months in separate trials for wearing a T-shirt and a mask printed with pro-democracy slogans; expressing anti-government political comments on social media platforms; and writing protest slogans on bus seats.

A City of Prisoners of Conscience

Today, across all of Latin America, a region of over 660 million people, there are around 3,300 prisoners of conscience. In Hong Kong, a city of just seven million, there are 1,940⁵. With over 300 people arrested under the draconian NSL⁶.

This staggering figure speaks to the scale of the PRC's repression.

³ Lai, Eric Yan-ho, Olivia Chow, and Thomas E. Kellogg. Rep. Anatomy of a Crackdown: The Hong Kong National Security Law and Restrictions on Civil Society. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Asian Law, 2024.

⁴ "The State of the World's Human Rights: April 2025." Amnesty International, April 28, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/8515/2025/en/>.

⁵ "Hong Kong Political Prisoners." HKDC, June 11, 2025. <https://www.hkdc.us/hong-kong-political-prisoners>.

⁶ "Hong Kong: Human Rights Update as of July 2024." Amnesty International, July 25, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/8362/2024/en/>.



Among them are the "Hong Kong 47," the city's most prominent pro-democracy figures, convicted of “conspiring to subvert state power” under the NSL, simply for participating in a peaceful primary election, marking the largest trial of its kind in the city's history.

Amnesty continues to campaign for those unjustly detained in Hong Kong, including:

- Chow Hang-tung (Human Rights Lawyer)—arbitrarily detained and has been spending her days and nights in solitary confinement.
- Jimmy Lai (Apple Daily Founder)—arbitrarily detained for over 1,700 days, and currently undergoing a politically charged trial without a jury.
- Leung Kwok-hung (Long Hair) (Former Lawmaker & Social Activist)—persecuted for taking part in peaceful protests and participating in the democratic primaries.
- Owen Chow (Nurse & Youth Activist)—a freshly graduated nurse who was once seen as one of the city's brightest rising stars, is now serving a 12-year and 10-month prison sentence solely for peacefully exercising his freedoms of expression and assembly.

This mass imprisonment of any Hongkonger who dared to disobey the PRC is not a side effect of their authoritarian practices but their core strategy to silence the voices of Hong Kong.

The system is no longer content with arrest and prosecution. It now seeks total isolation. Just last week, the Hong Kong government tightened its prison rules, allowing authorities to bar lawyer and chaplain visits on vague grounds related to national security⁷. Detainees can be cut off from their families, legal counsel, and the outside world, often before they are even convicted. This is an apparent attempt to isolate detained dissidents from external access and support, creating another black box for potential torture and inhumane treatment. These policies invert the presumption of innocence and weaponize incarceration as a tool of psychological warfare.

⁷ Leung, Kanis. “Hong Kong’s New Prison Rules May Curb Lawyer and Chaplain Visits on National Security Grounds.” AP News, July 19, 2025.

<https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-prison-rules-national-security-political-activism-ef9513d1c54425dd4dec7de3b6ef9b84>.



Future Trends

Unfortunately, all signs indicate something even darker—the PRC’s complete erasure of democracy and human rights.

There are no more opposition parties. No independent unions. No credible dissent. We are seeing the judiciary—once a source of integrity in Hong Kong—weaponized and now serving as a vehicle for persecution. Courts hand down preordained convictions. Legal definitions extend endlessly to accommodate the state's whims, and ambiguous legal tools are expanded to serve the purpose of “lawfare⁸.” A legal warfare to criminalize ordinary speech, thought, and behavior. The campaign against so-called “soft resistance” is the latest iteration of this effort. A blank piece of paper, a silent gesture, and a shared memory are all treated as threats to national security in today’s Hong Kong.

The national security apparatus continues to expand in scope. Under new economic security mandates, businesses are being surveilled and censored. Cultural correctness campaigns now regulate art, literature, and even school curricula. Most troubling of all, Article 23 criminalizes “theft of state secrets,” a term so vague it effectively bans investigative journalism and obstructs access to public information.

The trajectory is clear. The PRC does not merely want to control Hong Kong; it wants to rewrite its identity, erase its memory, and replace it with engineered obedience.

PRC’s Transnational Repression and Illiberal Influence

The PRC’s takeover of Hong Kong does not stop at its borders.

On December 13, 2023, I woke up to the news that I had become the first and, by far, only U.S. citizen wanted by the Hong Kong authorities for allegedly violating the NSL by “colluding with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security,” with a

⁸ Lai, Eric. “National Security Law Five Years on: Unpacking Five Major Trends in Governance.” 綠豆 Green Bean Media, July 1, 2025. <https://greenbean.media/national-security-law-five-years-on-unpacking-five-major-trends-in-governance/>.



one-million-Hong Kong-dollar bounty for my arrest⁹. The bounty led to countless threats against my life. This includes a concerning number of suspicious emails I received in January offering life insurance for “accidental events” and funeral and burial coverage in the event of my death.

Unfortunately, my case is the tip of the iceberg.

In the past five years, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments have been acting in lockstep to escalate transnational repression in both scope and sophistication against Hongkongers worldwide under extraterritorial clauses of the NSL and SNSO, including here in the U.S.

The PRC’s assault on Hong Kong is not just a Hong Kong issue. Their takeover of Hong Kong is a reflection of their blueprint for the global export of authoritarian practices. What we see in Hong Kong is being mirrored in Taiwan, across the Indo-Pacific, and increasingly in Latin America.

Policy Recommendations

The U.S. must respond with moral clarity and strategic commitment:

1. Prioritize human rights as a core principle of U.S. foreign policy.
2. Press for the Hong Kong government to immediately drop all criminal charges against and release prisoners of conscience who have been detained or imprisoned simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression or other human rights, specifically Chow Hang-tung, Jimmy Lai, Leung Kwok-hung, and Owen Chow.
3. Sustain and increase federal funding for organizations that support Hong Kong’s resistance against the PRC’s erosion, including the National Endowment for Democracy, Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, among others.
4. Guarantee humanitarian resettlement pathways for politically exposed Hongkongers. No one should be forced to choose between exile and imprisonment, silence and statelessness.

⁹ “Wanted Persons and Reward Notices of National Security Cases.” Hong Kong Police Force, 2023.
https://www.police.gov.hk/ppp_en/06_appeals_public/nsc/detail.html?id=20230011.



5. Enforce human rights due diligence against U.S. companies trading with the Hong Kong and PRC governments.

What's at stake is not just Hong Kong's future but the future of global democracy. If the U.S. allows the PRC's authoritarian practices to continue to metastasize in Hong Kong without consequence, it will spill over to other parts of the world.

I will end with a quote from my dear friend Owen, *"Evil always wreaks more havoc when the forces of good have been weakened, so let us latch onto the good and hold fast."*