

Hong Kong's Protest Movement Faces Existential Challenges

The twin blows of the pandemic and China's continued intervention have some Hong Kong protestors wondering how long they can fight.

By Matthew Keegan, Contributor June 2, 2020, at 11:41 a.m.



RIOT POLICE MASS DETAIN PRO-DEMOCRACY PROTESTERS DURING A RALLY IN CAUSEWAY BAY DISTRICT ON MAY 27, 2020 IN HONG KONG. (ANTHONY KWAN/GETTY IMAGES)

HONG KONG — [Hundreds of thousands](#) of Hong Kong residents took to the streets last year, drawing the world's attention, and China's ire, with their protests against a controversial extradition law and increasing intervention by the National People's Congress.

The protests quieted in early 2020, as attention turned to the novel coronavirus. But now they're back again, sparked by a controversial national security law approved by Beijing that many suspect will erode the freedoms promised to the semi-autonomous territory prior to its transfer from British to Chinese control.

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Though the recent protests have drawn thousands, they're still noticeably smaller than the massive gatherings of 2019. The twin blow of both the pandemic and Beijing's persistent intervention in the city has left protesters pondering how to fight back, or whether or not it's even worth trying.

"I feel like we tried every approach we could think of last year," says Veronica Li, a 38-year-old marketing executive who supports the protest movement. "But it's just been blow

after blow and many of us just feel weary. I imagine those that can will leave the city. Sad to say, but this new security law seems like the beginning of the end of Hong Kong."

For some, the fear of arrest is a deterrent.

"The police have adopted a lightning strategy aimed at nipping in the bud any protest, and arresting many, dissuading some from joining the protest," says Jeanne-Pierre Cabestan, professor of political science at Hong Kong Baptist University.

The risks posed by the coronavirus may also be keeping some protesters at home, though gatherings in recent days suggest those concerns may be lessening. While Hong Kong has avoided a major outbreak, it recently reported a [new cluster of cases](#), bringing the total number of cases to 1,090. (Only four people have died from the virus so far.)

Some experts believe the Hong Kong authorities have used the virus as a cover to weaken protests.

This spring, as the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the headlines, [authorities arrested](#) prominent pro-democracy figures in politics, civil society and the media. On Tuesday, the government [extended rules](#) that prevent gatherings with more than eight people in public places until June 18, meaning the June 4 annual candlelight vigil to honor victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests will be effectively banned for the first time in 30 years.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam has said repeatedly that the health measures have no political motive behind them, but others are not so sure. "This is obviously a political move when crowds are allowed to gather indoors but are denied to gather outdoors," says local lawmaker Charles Mok, who sits on the Hong Kong Legislative Council.

[**READ:** [Hong Kong Extends Restrictions After New Coronavirus Cluster](#)]

Freedom of assembly, or the right to protest, is just one of the freedoms promised to Hong Kong under the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984. According to the treaty, the territory would retain its own legal and judicial systems, along with its rights and freedoms, for a period of 50 years following its handover from British rule back to China in 1997.

The new national security law, approved in late May by Beijing, is aimed at stamping out protests that have rocked Hong Kong for the past year, banning "[any activities](#)" that threaten China's national security, including subversion, terrorism or conspiring with foreign influences. Some activists have called the approval of the law, which could be enacted in the next few months, the [death of the "One Country, Two Systems"](#) approach to governing the former British colony.

Since news of the controversial security law was announced, immigration consultants in the city have fielded hundreds of new calls. Many people are applying for or renewing their British National (Overseas) passport after Britain said last week that it might allow holders of the document to stay in the country for a year or more. And on Monday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said he was [considering welcoming people](#) from Hong Kong in response to the national security law.

"My BNO passport expired in 2004, but at the time I didn't renew it because I trusted China," 40-year-old Peter Chan told the [Associated Press](#). Despite increasing anti-immigrant and anti-Asian sentiment in the U.K., "it's still better than Hong Kong," he said. "In Hong Kong, you never know what will happen tomorrow."

But while those who can will likely leave the city, others are pinning their hopes on foreign pressures after news of China's proposed security law garnered international criticism.

Last Friday, President Donald Trump [accused Beijing of violating its obligations](#) and undermining Hong Kong's promised autonomy under the 1984 Sino-British Joint

Declaration, and said he would strip several of Hong Kong's special privileges with the United States.

[**READ:** [Why the Protests Will Fuel the Pandemic](#)]

Despite the international outrage, Cabestan says protesters are naive to count on foreign pressures. "There will be condemnations and criticism, but even the U.S. sanctions won't have much impact on Beijing," he says.

Amid all the threats Hong Kong's protest movement is now facing – the national security law, a tougher police crackdown, and the COVID-19 pandemic, it's hard to predict how long the fight will be able to continue.

Many say the annual anniversary of the 1997 handover from British to Chinese control this July 1 – a traditional day of protest and large marches – will be the next big test to measure the strength of the protest movement. Another key moment will be the city's legislative council elections and candidate registrations due to take place in September.

"Many potential candidates can be disqualified if Beijing's new national security law is promulgated before the election, which is likely, triggering more protest," Cabestan says.

But given how the grievances of Hong Kong's protesters have not gone away, Maya Wang, China senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, imagines that even after the new security law is implemented, people will still find a way to express themselves.

"While authorities will apply increasing pressure on these forms of protests going forward, I'd imagine that protesters will continue to find creative ways to make their voices heard."

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