

45 Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Figures Jailed in Landmark National Security Law Case

Legal scholar Benny Tai was among those sentenced on Nov. 19.

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Police keep watch outside the West Kowloon Magistrates' Court in Hong Kong on Nov. 19, 2024. Peter Parks/AFP via Getty Images



By Aldgra Fredly

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Dozens of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy campaigners have been jailed after a landmark trial that saw them convicted of subversion under China's National Security Law (NSL) for their participation in a 2020 primary election that was deemed illegitimate by the government.

Despite international condemnation following its verdicts against the pro-democracy campaigners in May 2023, Hong Kong's NSL-bound judicial system has proceeded with enforcing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s new framework for the city.

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— total of 47 pro-democracy advocates were **initially charged** with "conspiracy to subvert state power" for their roles in the election primary, which threatened to paralyze the government with a



constitutional crisis had they been elected.



— After a 118 day trial, 14 of the democrats who pleaded not guilty were found guilty, including Australian citizen Gordon Ng and Owen Chow, while two were acquitted. The Hong Kong government has said it will be appealing the acquittals.



The other 31 pleaded guilty, including student activist Joshua Wong and legal scholar Benny Tai.

Tai, who was labeled as an "organizer" of 47 pro-democracy advocates who participated in the July 2020 democratic primary, was among the 45 sentenced by Hong Kong's High Court on Tuesday. He was given a 10-year sentence for "conspiring to commit subversion," as defined under the NSL. His sentence was the **harshest** of the group.

The movement maintains it did not have a leader but was formed by Hong Kong leaders who share a yearning for political freedom in their city.

Owen Chow, a 27-year-old nursing student, was sentenced to seven years and nine months in prison, the second-longest penalty imposed among the convicted individuals.

Gordon Ng, a 46-year-old dual Australian and Hong Kong national, was [sentenced](#) to seven years and three months in prison for his role in organizing and participating in the election primary.

Former lawmaker Au Nok-hin and former journalist Gwyneth Ho were also sentenced to seven years in prison for their roles in the election primary.

Ho [posted](#) to Facebook, “I ran in the last free and fair election in Hong Kong. For that, I was prosecuted in the first Soviet(?)/CCP-style subversion case tried in a common law court.”

The democrats held their primary election as part of the city’s existing political process to decide the city’s Legislative Council seats. The result of the primary election was not legally binding, but it represented the voice of the more than 610,000 Hong Kong voters who participated.

Other prominent campaigners, including former journalist Claudia Mo and former lawmaker Helena Wong, received jail sentences ranging from six to four years.

Joshua Wong was sentenced to four years and eight months in jail. As officers led him away after the sentencing, he cried out “I love Hong Kong, bye bye!” [Hong Kong Free Press reported](#).

From among the judges designated to oversee Hong Kong’s national security cases, the three-judge panel ruling on the case were Judges Andrew Chan, Alex Lee, and Johnny Chan.

Hundreds of people had queued from the early hours outside the court, many holding umbrellas in light rain as they tried to secure a seat within the main courtroom and several spillover courts.

Authorities deployed a tight police presence outside the West Kowloon Magistrates Court and for several blocks in the vicinity.

“I feel such an injustice needs witnessing,” said Margaret, 59, dressed in a white raincoat and black facemask, who was in the queue since Sunday afternoon. “I’ve long followed their case. They need to know they still have public support.”

‘Sham’ Sentencing

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said that she was “gravely concerned” by the sentencing of Ng and other pro-democracy advocates under Hong Kong’s NSL, urging China to repeal the draconian law.

“The Australian Government has advocated at senior levels in support of Mr. Ng’s best interests and welfare and has sought consular access to Mr Ng. We will continue to do so,” she said in a [statement](#).

Wong said the Australian government has expressed its “strong objections to the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities on the continuing broad application of national security legislation.”

“We call for China to cease suppression of freedoms of expression, assembly, media and civil society, consistent with the Human Rights Committee and Special Procedure recommendations, including the repeal of the National Security Law in Hong Kong,” she added.

Hong Kong Watch, a non-governmental organization based in the United Kingdom, condemned the sentencing and urged the international community to respond and sanction those responsible.

“These sentences will set a precedent for other cases which involve those who have criticised the Hong Kong government and mark another downward turn in the crackdown on Hong Kong,” it said in a [statement](#).

Lord Patten of Barnes, the last governor of Hong Kong, called on the UK government to condemn the sentencing of the 45 Hong Kong campaigners, calling it a “sham.”

“I absolutely condemn these sham sentences, which resulted from a non-jury trial and point to the destruction of freedoms of assembly, expression, and the press in Hong Kong,” he stated.

Maya Wang, associate China director at Human Rights Watch, [said](#), “Running in an election and trying to win it is now a crime that can lead to a decade in prison in Hong Kong.”

Derek Mitchell, former U.S. ambassador to Burma, stated that the sentencing marked “another dark milestone in the regression of Hong Kong’s democracy and society.”

Melanie Sun, Frank Fang, Connie Yuen, Sherry Lin, and Harry McKenny contributed to this report.

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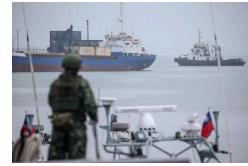
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