

US Is Preparing New Sanctions Over Sentencing of 45 Activists in Hong Kong: State Department

Hong Kong sentenced 45 pro-democracy activists to up to 10 years in prison, in the largest single prosecution under the CCP-imposed national security law.

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A queue forms outside the West Kowloon Magistrates' Court in Hong Kong on Nov. 19, 2024. Peter Parks/AFP via

By Dorothy Li

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The United States said on Nov. 19 that it is preparing new sanctions on Hong Kong officials in response to the sentencing of more than 40 pro-democracy activists in the special administrative region.

“The 45 defendants sentenced today were aggressively prosecuted, and many now face life-altering imprisonment simply for their peaceful participation in political activities which are protected under the Basic Law of Hong Kong,” State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in a [statement](#).



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In response, Miller said, the United States is “taking steps to impose new visa restrictions on multiple Hong Kong officials” responsible for implementing the [national security law](#).



We will continue to monitor the implementation of Hong Kong’s national security laws and promote accountability for human rights” in China and Hong Kong, he said.



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The city’s High Court on Nov. 19 handed down jail terms of up to [10 years](#) to the 45 leading pro-democracy activists in the local authorities’ largest clampdown to date under the draconian security law imposed by Beijing.

The 45 were among a group of legal scholars, former lawmakers, and politicians known as “Hong Kong 47” who were [arrested](#) after participating in an unofficial primary election in July 2020 to select candidates for the upcoming official legislative elections. Even though the vote was not sanctioned by the local government, it drew over [600,000](#) participants in a city of 7.5 million, which angered the communist regime in Beijing.

In February 2021, all 47 activists were [charged](#) with conspiracy to commit subversion under the national security law. Many of them have been detained since then.

In [May](#), a Hong Kong court convicted 14 defendants, who entered not guilty pleas, while 31 pleaded guilty. Only two of the defendants were acquitted.

On Nov. 19, [Benny Tai](#), a 60-year-old former legal professor described in the court [document](#) as the “mastermind” behind the plot, received the longest jail term of 10 years. Other pro-democracy leaders received prison sentences ranging from 50 months to 93 months.

“The United States strongly condemns the sentences announced today in Hong Kong’s National Security Law (NSL) trial of pro-democracy advocates,” Miller said, urging local authorities to “immediately and unconditionally” release the 45 activists and other political prisoners.

The development has also drawn criticism from foreign governments and lawmakers.

The European Union called the sentencing of the pro-democracy advocates “another unprecedented blow” against Hong Kong’s “fundamental freedoms,” “democratic participation,” and “pluralism.”

“The EU remains deeply concerned about the politically motivated prosecution of the defendants who are being punished, in many cases with harsh prison terms,” the bloc’s diplomatic arm, the European External Action Service (EEAS), said in a [statement](#).

Australia also expressed grave concern about the fate of the dozens of Hong Kong pro-democracy advocates, including an Australian citizen, Gordon Ng, who was sentenced to seven years and three months in prison.

“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,” Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said in a [statement](#).

Beijing's Reaction

Hong Kong's Secretary for Security [Tang Ping-keung](#) said the sentencing "reflected the severity of the offence," adding that the authorities are still considering whether to lodge appeals regarding the sentences.

Faced with international criticism, Lin Jian, China's foreign ministry spokesman, said at a regular briefing on Nov. 19 that the Chinese regime "firmly supports" Hong Kong authorities' decision to "punish all kinds of activities that endanger national security in accordance with the law."

"We steadfastly oppose some Western countries taking individual judicial cases as a pretext to interfere in China's internal affairs and to smear and undermine the rule of law in Hong Kong," Lin [told](#) reporters in Beijing.

The national security law, imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Hong Kong four years ago in the wake of mass pro-democracy protests, criminalized speeches or actions deemed secessionist, subversive, terrorist, or colluding with foreign forces against the communist regime.

More than 200 people have been arrested on allegations of violating the security law since its enactment in 2020, with around half subsequently convicted, according to a Hong Kong Business Advisory [published](#) jointly by the U.S. Departments of State, Agriculture, Commerce, Homeland Security, and Treasury on Sept. 6.

Lawmakers Demand More Sanctions

The Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), an alliance of more than 200 lawmakers from 40 countries that focus on confronting the Chinese regime's rights abuses and other activists, denounced the convictions of the Hong Kong activists as "a travesty of justice."

“This is clear evidence, if any more were needed, of the precipitous decline in the rule of law in Hong Kong,” the IPAC said in a [statement](#). “No credible system would countenance such ludicrously harsh sentences for people who merely wanted to vote.”

Engin Eroglu, a member of the European Parliament (MEP), called on Brussels to impose “targeted sanctions against the [puppet](#) government in Hong Kong.”

In the United States, Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) and Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ohio), chair and co-chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), respectively, noted that the Hong Kong authorities are jailing pro-democracy advocates while simultaneously seeking [U.S. investment](#).

“These politically motivated prosecutions are occurring at the same time that dozens of U.S. CEOs are being wined and dined by Hong Kong officials,” they said in a [statement](#). “Each of these U.S. financial titans should be asked whether the Hong Kong government’s mass detentions of political prisoners and regular bulldozing of the rule of law undermine the city’s attractiveness as an international commercial and financial center.

They urged the Biden administration to sanction “judges and prosecutors responsible for undermining democracy and human rights in Hong Kong.”

‘We Must Have Hope’

Prior to the verdict, Owen Chow, an activist who received the second longest jail term of seven years and nine months, shared a reflective message on his Facebook page.

“Living in an uneasy environment, we must have hope,” Chow [wrote](#) in Chinese.

“Today is the day of sentencing. I am by no means optimistic about the jailing terms, but I see hope. Because even though the day of freedom

is still far away, we finally see the end.”

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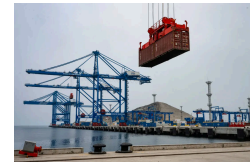
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