

Hong Kong Looks Like a Police State

The legislature rubber stamps rules outlawing disrespect to China's national anthem, but a pending treason law will have far greater effect.

Chinese stocks led losses for a mixed day's trade in Asia on Wednesday, and Hong Kong looks like a police state. There are cops at every intersection, flashing lights wherever you turn, and many of the force's 31,180 officers are on the street.

The Hang Seng was down 1.1% in late-afternoon trade before a late rally pared that to 0.4% at the bell. Hong Kong's benchmark has now shed 4.8% since China announced that it would interfere directly in Hong Kong. It will write a treason law in Beijing to insert into the constitution of this supposedly self-governed city.

Hong Kongers are hoping for a response this week as promised by the U.S. administration, while China is bracing for it. The CSI 300 index of the biggest mainland stocks was off 0.7% on Wednesday, at odds with gains of 1.0% in Tokyo.

Hong Kong police fired tear gas and pepper pellets at Wednesday's protests and arrested at least 300 people. Protesters chanted the familiar refrain "Liberate Hong Kong! Revolution of our times." The newly proposed sedition law has led to a fresh slogan, "Hong Kong independence, the only way out!"

Today's protests are sparked by a rubber-stamp reading in Hong Kong's legislature of a totally different law that criminalizes any disrespect shown to the mainland Chinese national anthem, the *March of the Volunteers*.

This new law, virtually assured to pass, will punish anyone who alters the lyrics, sings the song in a derogatory way, or insults the song. You can be jailed for three years, and fined HK\$50,000 (US\$6,400) for not showing the proper courtesy to the dirge, adopted by the Communist forces in 1949 at the end of China's civil war. The new law forces primary and secondary schools to teach students the song, as well as its "history and spirit."

You may get a little confused about the drips and drabs of legislation being laid down in Hong Kong. That's the point. It is a stream of restriction.

We have long prided ourselves on Hong Kong's "rule of law." That's the precedent-based legal system and independent judiciary making Hong Kong so safe and steady compared to the Communist whims of the mainland dictatorship.

China, and its lackey government here, have decided to "rule by law." They continue to arrest and charge their critics for arcane crimes. There's selective prosecution. And one piece of new legislation comes after another that whittles away at Hong Kong's autonomy.

Last year's demonstrations were precipitated by a proposed law to allow extradition into China's rigged legal system. That was finally withdrawn. Now Beijing figures it will stop messing around by operating covertly through Hong Kong's leadership, and will just rule directly.

So China's parliament is now planning to write a new law especially for Hong Kong, which is supposed to write its own laws. Instead, the Communist Party will be telling Hong Kong what will and won't be legal in terms of political free speech.

Hong Kong's constitution says it is required to "enact laws on its own" against "treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets," and to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from operating in the city. But an attempt to pass this "Article 23" amendment drew such fury in 2003 that 500,000 people marched against it, and that bill was also withdrawn. The constitution also says Hong Kong must introduce democracy, by the way.

The central government has decided simply to lay down Hong Kong law itself. They have rigged the local government system to their benefit, with half of its members appointed by loyalists, but still can't get their way. Elections due for September may well elect more democracy advocates.

It's my duty to quote the official viewpoint on this topic, but essentially the comments are either lies or double talk. You can assume exactly the opposite is true.

The new security law "is for the long-term stability of Hong Kong and China, it won't affect the freedom of assembly and speech, and it won't affect the city's status as a financial center," Hong Kong's No. 2 official, Chief Secretary Matthew

Cheung, said at a press conference.

Unfortunately, the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy very much calls into question its status as a financial center. And I'm not sure what kind of freedom of speech anyone has if they're no longer allowed to say they think Hong Kong should be independent, or that the Communist Party isn't perfect, or even that the ponderous Chinese national anthem drags on a little.

The government has not consulted the public about the national anthem law, because they know it is unpopular. Instead, they are today "debating" its second reading, a formality toward getting it passed. Pro-democracy legislators held it up by filibustering before pro-Beijing lawmakers physically seized control of a committee in a scuffle and put themselves in charge.

The political pressure on Hong Kong's freedoms comes as the city calms down over the coronavirus scare. Hong Kong was on high alert as the Wuhan virus first surfaced just before the Lunar New Year. But Hong Kong has got off relatively easy, with "only" 1,066 confirmed cases and 4 deaths, largely thanks to voluntary distancing and mask-wearing adopted by the public well before they were told to do so.

The Chinese leadership has been furious, and very worried, about the pro-democracy protests that began last spring. The dissident voices are a direct challenge to Beijing's authority that simply wouldn't be allowed anywhere in mainland China.

If the national security bill passes, they will no longer be possible in Hong Kong, either. China is planning to allow itself to open branches of its secret service in Hong Kong, sending spies into the city, even though Hong Kong's constitution says it cannot. So the same chilling effect seen in China, where dissidents are locked up for decades at a time, and members of the public are understandably reticent to speak their political mind, will occur in Hong Kong.

Wednesday's police state activity here is a sign of things to come. Now ... sing that song, it's an order!

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