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Hong Kong

Protesters turn out in force against jailing of Hong Kong activists

- News from around the world -

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Tens of thousands took to the streets of Hong Kong on Sunday (20 August) to condemn the jailing of young pro-democracy activists over illegal protests, even as the city's leading legal professionals warned against painting recent court rulings as political persecution.

Organisers claimed the rally was the biggest since the Occupy protests of 2014, but would not venture an estimate, while police put the figure at a more conservative 22,000 – still higher than their total for the July 1 annual pro-democracy rally, which has been dwindling in recent years.

The outpouring of condemnation came after government prosecutors succeeded in securing stiffer sentences from the Court of Appeal for student activists Joshua Wong Chi-fung, Nathan Law Kwun-chung and Alex Chow Yong-kang, who were jailed for six to eight months last week.

Thousands decry jailing of Hong Kong pro-democracy activists in “biggest protest since Occupy”

It was the government's second successful bid in a week to review community service orders and suspended sentences for political activists as the same panel of judges had earlier jailed 13 other activists for up to 13 months over another illegal protest.

“We are very encouraged to see so many people came out today to support the jailed activists,” student leader and march organiser Lester Shum said. “It is proof that Hong Kong people will not be scared away by political persecution.”

Democracy campaigners are now hoping it will rejuvenate their movement which has been faltering since the Occupy protests.

Political commentator Chung Kim-wah said Sunday's high turnout was expected as Hongkongers felt a strong sense of oppression in the face of the government's crackdown on activists, including the disqualification of pro-democracy lawmakers over oath-taking.

In another strong response from Beijing, the foreign ministry's office in Hong Kong slammed overseas governments for criticising the court rulings and warned them not to meddle in the city's affairs.

More legal experts waded into the debate to warn that such criticism was undermining the rule of law and judicial independence by suggesting the courts were victimising activists at Beijing's behest.

Former Bar Association chairman and senior counsel Paul Shieh Wing-tai said it was wrong to paint the jailing of the trio as political persecution. He said they were paying the price for breaking the law by storming the government headquarters compound and setting off the Occupy sit-ins.

Shieh pointed out that they had pledged to face the legal consequences when they took part in the Occupy protests.

“They would win respect from a lot of people ... if they face the jail terms calmly instead,” he said.

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The Bar Association and the Law Society, the city's two biggest groups of legal professionals, took an unprecedented step on Friday to jointly defend judicial independence and the rule of law.

Shieh found the ruling "a bit emotional" in that Court of Appeal vice-president Wally Yeung Chun-kuen slammed the "unhealthy trend" of intellectuals advocating the idea of civil disobedience in Hong Kong and breaking the law for what they might consider a loftier ideal.

He also said University of Hong Kong law professor Benny Tai Yiu-ting "had a lot to answer for" as the co-founder of Occupy Central had imposed a lot of "unrealistic expectations" on the civil disobedience campaign, such as assumptions that there would be no violence.

What troubled Shieh the most was the trend of people jumping to conclusions about the end of the rule of law whenever the courts handed down a ruling that upset them.

But he conceded that moves to disqualify pan-democratic lawmakers could be the reason for the lack of trust. Shieh revealed that he had voted for Nathan Law last year.

Executive Councillor Ronny Tong Ka-wah, a senior counsel and former pan-democratic lawmaker, warned that accusing the judges of succumbing to political manipulation could constitute contempt of court.

He also objected to people describing the lawbreakers as "political prisoners".

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