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Hong Kong

Hong Kong's mass arrests are an assault on grassroots advocacy

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On 6 January 2021, the Hong Kong Police Force arrested over 50 pro-democracy politicians and activists for running in the Legislative Council (LegCo) democratic primary election under the National Security Law. [1]

The primary, held in July 2020, mobilized a record turnout of over 600,000 voters to express their preferences for pro-democratic politicians among the traditional pan-democratic and localist camps. It was meant for the public to choose two slates of pro-democratic candidates most likely to win in the LegCo election scheduled for November 2020, though it was ultimately postponed by the Hong Kong government under the pretense of coronavirus fears.

Almost every candidate in the primary, including both established and younger opposition figures, were arrested. Their intent to secure a legislative majority to vote down the Hong Kong annual budget plan was deemed “subversive” under the National Security Law. The police also presented search warrants at independent news outlets and the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, which conducted polling for the election.

Following Beijing's disqualification of four incumbent lawmakers in November 2020 that led to the mass resignation of pro-democratic legislative councillors, this suggests an end to an effective political opposition in the city's legislature. [2]

This outrageous wave of arrest cements the government's intent to stifle and criminalize all dissent. It implies that the government's removal of its parliamentary opposition has expanded to a full assault on Hong Kong's civil society, including targeted arrests on academics, researchers, labor organizers, and advocates of social justice for marginalized communities.

While the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement has often emphasized dual universal suffrage—the right to directly elect the Chief Executive and the entire legislature—as one of its core demands, the movement encompasses interconnected social justice issues. Among the 53 people arrested, several were seasoned activists and organizers fighting for labor, migrant, racial, and disability justice.

[Jeffrey Andrews](#), a democratic primary candidate who was arrested, was both the first social worker of Indian descent in the city, and the [first person of a non-white ethnic minority](#) to run for LegCo. As a senior social worker at the Center for Refugees, a drop-in community center for asylum seekers, Andrews wanted to represent the rights of ethnic minorities from within the institution. [Chi-yung Lee](#), another arrested primary candidate, joined the race because he wanted to advocate for [disability justice](#). As a caretaker of a severely disabled daughter, Lee advocated for more accessible public transportation and city planning.

Similarly, prominent pro-democracy figure Eddie Chu Hoi-dick, who was also arrested, has long been advocating for the rights of immigrant detainees and [migrant domestic workers](#) along with demands for electoral democracy. [3] For Andrews, Lee, and Chu, securing seats in the LegCo was not merely about challenging Beijing's rule, but also about advocating for marginalized groups in Hong Kong whose experiences and needs were often ignored in favor of corporations and those in power.

The mass arrest of these lawmakers shatters the illusion that democratic candidates who were not previously disqualified could present a legislative challenge to the government's plan to distribute billions in HKD to the Hong Kong Police Force, alongside “white elephant projects” like the Lantau Tomorrow Vision that cede ground to property

developers' interests and exacerbate environmental devastation. [4]

Among the arrested democratic primary candidates were also union leaders like [Carol Ng](#) and Winnie Yu, respectively the chairperson of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), and the founder and chairperson of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance (HKEA). [5]

The new union movement in Hong Kong, emerging from attempts to coordinate general strikes and seek parliamentary representation in the LegCo's functional constituencies, sought to extend movement energy through sharing information, building worker solidarity, and conducting industrial actions such as the medical workers' strike in February 2020. [6] Yu was herself featured in "[Medical Workers' Unions—Movement Building from US to HK](#)," a webinar organized by *Lausan* in late June to facilitate exchange and learning between labor activists in the United States and Hong Kong.

The new union movement connects the demand for democracy with economic struggles, making clear that the pro-democracy movement cannot be separated from the capitalist material conditions that perpetuate class inequity in Hong Kong. As Leo Tang, a labor organizer from HKCTU, noted in a letter from prison, the new union movement connects labor rights with political demands and "unearths the potential to sustain the movement through the transformation of relations." [7] Ng and Yu's arrests signal an affront from the Hong Kong government towards the new union movement, which has been effectively building power from the ground up.

While undoubtedly another crushing setback, the redrawn fronts of struggle may yet unearth novel forms of resistance. [8] Can the movement energy in legislative activism be redirected towards direct action? Can the intensifying persecution of activist leaders compel ordinary folk to organize and advocate for their own communities? How do we connect with other movements and communities, in the interlinked arena of transnational struggle? [9]

Source [Lausan](#).

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[1] *Hong Kong Free Press*, 6 January 2021 "[Hong Kong police say 53 were arrested for trying to use strategic voting to win election, veto budget & shut down gov't](#)" and 12 July 2020 "[Hong Kong people made history again': Over 600,000 vote in democrats' primaries as co-organiser hails 'miracle' turnout](#)".

[2] Human Rights Watch, 12 November 2020 "[China: Beijing Forces Out Hong Kong Opposition Lawmakers](#)", 11 November 2020 "[All Hong Kong democrats to quit after gov't ousts 4 lawmakers, leaving legislature with no effective opposition](#)".

[3] *Lausan* "[Asylum seekers and migrant workers speak up about horrific conditions in Hong Kong immigration detention](#)".

[4] *HKFP*, 27 February 2020 "[Hong Kong Budget 2020: Democrats angered as police receive HK\\$25.8 billion boost in manpower and gear](#)", 25 November 2020 "[Policy Address 2020: Controversial HK\\$624 billion Lantau Tomorrow housing project to go ahead](#)".

[5] *The Guardian*, 6 January 2021 "[Hong Kong arrests: who are the pro-democracy activists being targeted?](#)".

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[6] *Lausan*, 15 December 2020 [“The dilemma of the new union movement”](#), 27 November 2020 [“A new labour movement birthed from the flames of struggle”](#), *HKFP*, 5 February 2020 [“‘Limited weapons to fight an endless war’: Hong Kong medics strike for third day over coronavirus border closure”](#).

[7] *Lausan*, 8 November 2020 [“The present is the beginning”](#).

[8] *Lausan*, 26 December 2020 [“Undoing dependency: How to build a future from below”](#).

[9] *Lausan*, 19 December 2020 [“Why building coalition with migrant justice groups is critical for Hongkongers”](#).