

19 August 2020

Joint statement on the decline of press freedom in Hong Kong

We, the undersigned, are troubled by the decline in press freedom and democratic rights in Hong Kong and express our deep concern about the ramifications of the imposition of national security legislation by the Beijing authorities.

Hong Kong has long been respected as a powerful global economic hub and lively political and democratic space, supported by a proud and strong independent media. Yet the imposition of the new national security law, passed by the Standing Committee of the China's National People's Congress on June 30, 2020, has undermined fundamental rights and freedom of expression – notwithstanding by bypassing Hong Kong's legislature – and severely damages Hong Kong's autonomy.

Since that time, the Government of Hong Kong has wasted little time in curbing its citizens' liberties by using the new law to curtail peaceful speech and protests and arrest critics. This was evidenced last week by the arrest of prominent Hong Kong media owner Jimmy Lai, along with other journalists and activists, while the Beijing authorities announced sanctions against at least 11 Americans, including leaders of human rights and pro-democracy organisations – two of whom are signatories on this letter.

The events of the past week clearly show the law's potential for abuse in establishing a climate of fear and self-censorship and the threat it poses to rule of law and fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong.

Jimmy Lai is a powerful voice for democracy in Hong Kong and a well-known critic of Beijing. *Apple Daily*, which he founded in 1995, is one of Hong Kong's most popular newspapers precisely because of its critical stance on political and human rights issues. After his arrest on August 10, about 200 police officers raided the headquarters of the Next Digital group, *Apple Daily's* parent company, in an excessive show of force. They also arrested Lai's two sons and a number of executives of Next Media. The same day, police arrested pro-democracy activist and politician Agnes Chow, together with activists Wilson Li and Andy Li.

The national security law provides for criminal penalties of up to life imprisonment for the broadly-defined crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign powers. To date, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam has remained silent on how the law might be applied against journalists and the media.

Not only does this law provide sweeping new powers to arrest journalists and activists, it also has the ability to weaken judicial oversight by Hong Kong's judiciary. Governments globally have outlined that China's imposition of this law lies in direct conflict with its international obligations under the principles of the legally-binding, UN-registered Sino-British Joint Declaration.

As a coalition of press freedom and human rights organisations, we strongly condemn the arrest, harassment and intimidation of journalists and activists in Hong Kong. We stand with the people of Hong Kong in demanding the protection of democratic and media freedoms.

We urge the governments of China and Hong Kong to uphold democratic principles and to respect human rights. To do otherwise, would see the demise of the stability, economic success and prosperity of Hong Kong.

Signed:

Article 19

Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD)

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Freedom House

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

IFEX

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Alliance for Journalists' Freedom (AJF)