



RSF TIMELINE
TWO YEARS OF GOVERNMENT
ASSAULT ON HONG KONG'S
PRESS FREEDOM

INTRODUCTION

Two years of government assault on Hong Kong's press freedom

A quarter of a century after Hong Kong's handover to the People's Republic of China, the principle of press freedom, although guaranteed until 2047 in the Basic Law that commands the territory, is more threatened than ever. Within one generation, Beijing progressively has taken control of parts of Hong Kong's Chinese-language media and established an indirect system of putting pressure on other media through their advertisers.

On 30th June 2020, the situation further worsened with the adoption by China's highest legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, often referred to as the National Security Law.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is taking a closer look at this two year period widely considered the worst yet for press freedom in the territory's modern history.

For the first time, more than two dozen journalists and press freedom defenders have been arrested, with thirteen currently in custody awaiting trials, and two independent media outlets have been forced-closed by the government. At the same time, in order to please the Chinese regime, Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, targets symbols of press freedom such as public broadcaster RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong).



© Apple Daily / On 17th June 2021. Approximately 500 police officers raids the headquarters of Hong Kong's largest Chinese-language opposition newspaper Apple Daily and arrest its five staff members.

April

15th

The head of China's liaison office in Hong Kong, Luo Huining, calls for the rapid passing of a national security bill designed to eradicate the territory's pro-democracy movement. The law had been shelved after the Hong Kong chief executive first attempted to propose it for adoption in 2002 and quickly withdrew it the following year after half a million Hong Kongers took to the streets in protest.

May

19th

Publicly funded broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) axes popular and satirical current affairs television show "Headliner", which had drawn official complaints after satirising the Hong Kong police in an episode in February 2020.

21st

Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) Board of Advisors announces the formation of a "working group" that will monitor the governance and editorial principles of the public broadcaster, to which neither management nor staff representatives are invited to join.

28th

The National People's Congress, China's parliament, adopts the Hong Kong National Security Law which punishes with a life sentence four vaguely-defined "crimes against the state".

June

10th

The chairman of public broadcaster RTHK Board of Advisors, Eugene Chan, publicly demands the channel to broadcast a propaganda series promoting a "correct understanding" of the National Security Law.

18th

A survey by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) reveals that 98% of local journalists fear that the National Security Law would be used against them.

24th

The Foreign Correspondents' Club Hong Kong (FCCHK) issues an open letter to Chief Executive Carrie Lam to seek clarification on the potential impact of the National Security Law on press freedom.

30th

The Chinese regime's highest legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, passes the National Security Law, thus bringing it into force.



The National Security Law

© Hong Kong Government. Attendees from various Hong Kong's forces stand next to a banner supporting the new National Security Law on 1st July 2020 to mark the 23rd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from the United Kingdom.

On 30th June 2020, China's highest legislature, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, passed the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. This law, imposed in blatant disregard to Hong Kong's autonomy, and to the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, allows the Chinese regime to directly intervene in the special administrative region of Hong Kong and to punish what it considers "crimes against the state" that bear maximum sentences of life in prison. This blurry regulation opens the door to arbitrary arrests and can specifically threaten journalists and independent media outlets.

"Collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security":

● Enforcement in Hong Kong

In 2020, **Jimmy Lai**, the founder of Apple Daily, was charged with this crime. In 2021, six Apple Daily employees, including journalists, were charged with conspiring with Lai to "collude with foreign forces". In January 2020, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam suggested that foreign media, and even Hong Kong media founded by foreign residents, could be mouthpieces of Western governments.

"Subversion"

● Enforcement in Hong Kong

Press freedom defenders **Claudia Mo** and **Gwyneth Ho Kwai-lam** have been detained in 2021 under this crime for supporting democracy and press freedom in the territory. Journalists who report on pro-independence events or quote pro-independence activists, as well as those who write critical opinion pieces or investigative pieces concerning the Chinese regime, could be charged with this crime.

“Secession”

● Enforcement in Hong Kong

Under the National Security Law, any journalist writing on Hong Kong's cultural identity or the pro-independence movement could be charged with “separatism”. **Victor Mallet**, Asia news editor for the Financial Times, was expelled from Hong Kong in 2018 for having served as a moderator at a debate held by the Foreign Correspondents' Club Hong Kong (FCCHK) that featured a pro-independence activist. Had the security law existed at this time, Mallet could have been accused of “secession”.

“Terrorist Activities”

● Enforcement in Hong Kong

As the Chinese regime and Hong Kong executive often refer to the pro-democracy movement as “terrorism”, reporting at the scene of protests could be prosecutable under the National Security Law as an act of terrorism. Similarly, in China, foreign reporters who report on these movements could be arrested or expelled for “supporting terrorism”.

July

7th

Chief Executive Carrie Lam says that press freedom is assured if “all reporters in Hong Kong” give a “100% guarantee” they will not commit security offences as defined by the National Security Law.

14th

The New York Times announces its plans to move a third of its Hong Kong staff to South Korea in the wake of the National Security Law, needing to “make contingency plans and begin to diversify our editing staff around the region” as their journalism “is now more important than ever”.

29th

The Hong Kong Police Force orders at least five Hong Kong digital media platforms to leave a press conference with senior superintendent of the National Security Department Steve Li, including EggEggClub News, HKGolden, Ben Yu Entertainment Ltd, Community Media, and PSHK Media.

August

6th

The FCCHK expresses that foreign reporters in the territory are experiencing “highly unusual” visa problems, with multiple media outlets having reported delays getting visas in recent months.

10th

Two hundred police officers raid the headquarters of Apple Daily, Hong Kong's largest Chinese-language opposition newspaper, and its founder Jimmy Lai is detained for 40 hours on suspicion of “collusion with foreign forces”.



Jimmy Lai

© Peter Parks / AFP

Apple Daily's founder and 2020 RSF Press Freedom Awards laureate has for the past three decades been an outspoken advocate for press freedom and democracy in Hong Kong. Detained since December 2020, he is facing multiple charges, including two under the National Security Law, and has already been sentenced to 20 months in prison for "organising" and "taking part" in three "unauthorised" protests. In previous years, Jimmy Lai and the media he founded were the target of constant harassment by the authorities, and of several criminal attacks.

August

11th

The Hong Kong Police Force announced it would only allow "trusted media" which have not "behaved in a way that the police deemed unprofessional" to access their operations on the ground, after restricting the access of several local and international news organisations to the 10th August raid on Apple Daily, including Reuters, AFP, AP, Stand News, and InMedia.

13th

RTHK says it removed activist Nathan Law's 31st July interview about the postponed legislative election due to unconfirmed reports that he is wanted by Hong Kong police "on suspicion of violating the National Security Law".

19th

HKJA and RTHK Programme Staff Union challenges the government's Communications Authority, which issued a warning against the RTHK show "Headliner" for allegedly "insulting" the police in its episode of 14th February 2020.

25th

The Hong Kong immigration office rejects without reason a work visa for **Aaron Mc Nicholas**, an Irish editor that online independent media Hong Kong Free Press (HKFP) wished to recruit and who had worked in Hong Kong since 2015.

September

22nd

The Hong Kong government announces that it reserves its future press briefings to “internationally recognised” media only, without providing any details on the definition they will use, which de facto excludes independent media outlets and freelance journalists.

23rd

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs accuses the FCCHK of “stirring up trouble” after it raised concerns over new police media guidelines, and calls for the club to “stop meddling” in the territory’s affairs.

27th

Hong Kong public broadcaster RTHK reopens its investigation into journalist **Nabela Qoser**’s conduct due to her tough questioning of top Hong Kong government officials, and extends her already three-year probationary period by an additional 120 days.

October

15th

National Security Department police officers raid a private office in Kowloon belonging to Apple Daily founder **Jimmy Lai**.

19th

Hong Kong district councillor is sentenced after identifying the police officer who allegedly shot Indonesian journalist **Veby Mega Indah** in the eye while covering a November 2020 protest, resulting in her losing sight in one eye.

November

3rd

Police arrest freelance producer **Choy Yuk-ling** (also known as Bao Choy), accused of “making false statements” while researching for an RTHK documentary that highlighted police inaction during a mob attack targeting train passengers and passers-by in the district of Yuen Long in 2019. She is released on bail the same day and later pleads not guilty at her hearing in January 2021.

December

1st

Numerous journalists at i-Cable news channel resign in protest after the broadcaster fires 40 of their colleagues, citing the economic impact of Covid-19, including the entire team of News Lancet, one of the territory’s most respected investigative programmes.

2nd

Jimmy Lai and two Next Digital executives are charged with fraud, Unlike his two associates charged simultaneously, Lai is initially denied bail.

11th

Jimmy Lai is charged with foreign “collusion with foreign forces” under the National Security Law. He is later released on bail under strict conditions amounting to house arrest.

31st

Under pressure from Beijing and Hong Kong government officials, prosecutors succeed in overturning the decision to grant **Jimmy Lai** bail and the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal orders him back to jail.

January

6th

Press freedom defenders and former journalists **Claudia Mo** and **Gwyneth Ho** are arrested along with 53 other figures of the pro-democracy movement under the National Security Law on suspicion of “conspiracy to commit subversion”, and soon after released on bail. On the same day, Police officers search the newsrooms of pro-democracy news outlets Apple Daily, InMedia, and Stand News, demanding documents relating to candidates who ran in Hong Kong’s July pro-democracy primary elections.

IN FOCUS



Claudia Mo

© Peter Parks / AFP

Former Hong Kong Legislative Council member and ex-journalist, Claudia Mo has been a prominent defender of press freedom in the territory and was arrested in January 2021 under the National Security Law for alleged “subversion”, along with 53 other figures of the pro-democracy movement.

Mo is an ex-legislator who served from 2012 to 2020, was a correspondent for Agence France-Presse (AFP) from 1986 to 1991 and later a host for Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), and columnist in Apple Daily and Ming Pao until 2005. In 2019, she cooperated with RSF to organise its World Press Freedom Index press conference within the Legislative Council premises.

Claudia Mo has been in detention since 28th February 2021. In April, she was denied bail for the second time, partly on the grounds of her having given “interviews with foreign media” in the past.

February

7th

Internet radio channel D100 programme host **Wan Yiu-sing** (also known as “Giggs”) is charged under the National Security Law of conspiring to commit an act with a “seditious intention” for making critical comments about Hong Kong and Chinese authorities. He and his wife had previously been arrested on 21st November 2020 on suspicion of “secession” and money laundering.

11th

Public broadcaster RTHK suspends BBC World News following China’s broadcasting regulator’s ban due to its report on Beijing’s treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.

28th

Press freedom defenders and former journalists **Claudia Mo** and **Gwyneth Ho** are charged with “subversion” under the National Security Law and later denied bail.

March

1st

The Hong Kong government overhauls public broadcaster RTHK, replacing its head with Patrick Li, who establishes a censorship system.

IN FOCUS



Patrick Li

© Candice Chau / Hong Kong Free Press. Radio Television Hong Kong staff union demonstrates in support of journalist Nabela Qoser after she was told to accept a new short-term contract or face dismissal.

Commissioner of Radio Television Hong Kong's (RTHK)

Since 1st March 2021, the day Patrick Li took up his position as Radio Television Hong Kong's (RTHK) Director of Broadcasting, at least 12 new productions have been pulled from the air at short notice and more than 200 past episodes of documentary programme “Hong Kong Connection” and news talk show “The Pulse” have been deleted from the public broadcaster’s YouTube channel. Patrick Li, a bureaucrat without any media experience, has also threatened to halve the salaries of employees involved in the production of content he considers unfit for publishing.

The recruitment of Patrick Li led to the resignation of at least four staff members, namely executive producers **Fong Hiu-shan**, **Liu Wai-ling**, **Doris Wong**, and award-winning reporter, **Yvonne Tong**. Another journalist, **Nabela Qoser**, known for posing hard-hitting questions to government officials, did not have her contract renewed.

April

7th

RTHK management threatens to halve the salaries of journalists who produce material of which they disapprove that is subsequently pulled from airing.

12th

The Hong Kong printing warehouse of US-headquartered daily newspaper The Epoch Times is stormed by four armed and masked individuals who threaten employees and damage the main printing press and other equipment with sledgehammers.

16th

Apple Daily founder **Jimmy Lai** is sentenced to 14 months in prison for "unauthorised assembly" and is also charged with "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces", his second alleged offence under the National Security Law.

22nd

Investigative journalist **Choy Yuk-ling** is convicted of making "false statements" in an award-winning documentary for public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) criticising police inaction to protect protestors and members of the public during a pro-democracy demonstration.

28th

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam begins hosting her own daily Cantonese-language talk show, aired four times a day on public broadcaster RTHK, enabling her to promote unpopular electoral reform imposed by China without exposing herself to questions from journalists.

May

3rd

RTHK terminates the contract of its outspoken journalist **Nabela Qoser**, known for her tough questioning of government officials..

10th

Radio host **Wan Yiu-Sing** (also known as "Giggs") is charged with one additional count of conspiring to commit "an act with a seditious intention" in addition to five counts of money laundering. The next day, Epoch Times reporter **Sarah Liang** is hospitalised after an unknown person assaulted her with a baseball bat near her apartment building.

11th

Epoch Times reporter **Sarah Liang** is hospitalised after an unknown person assaulted her with a baseball bat near her apartment building.

14th

Hong Kong authorities freeze the assets of Apple Daily founder **Jimmy Lai** under the National Security Law, including his shares in Next Digital Limited and bank accounts belonging to three other companies he owns.

28th

Jimmy Lai is sentenced again to 14 months in prison by a Hong Kong court for "organising" an "unauthorised" protest in October 2019. This sentence was added to two other sentences previously handed down for similar charges and brings the total time Lai will serve in prison up to 20 months.

June

17th

Approximately 500 police officers raid the headquarters of independent Hong Kong media outlet Apple Daily, while authorities also freeze Apple Daily's HK\$18 million assets (about €2 million). Apple Daily's Chief Editor **Ryan Law**, Chief Executive **Cheung Kim-hung**, Chief Operating Officer **Royston Chow**, Associate Publisher **Chan Pui-man**, and Director of Apple Daily Digital **Cheung Chi-wai** are arrested under the National Security Law on suspicion of "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces".

23rd

Apple Daily announces it will shut down on 24th June following the police raid on its headquarters, the arrest of its senior staff, and the government's freezing of Apple Daily and parent company Next Digital assets. Police arrest **Yeung Ching-kee**, known under the pseudonym "Li Ping", Apple Daily's lead editorial writer and columnist known for his criticism of the Chinese regime.

27th

Fung Wai-kong, Apple Daily's senior journalist and executive editor-in-chief of the English section also known as "Lo Fung", is arrested at the airport when he reportedly tries to leave for the United Kingdom.



© Anthony Wallace / AFP. Newsstand employees sort through copies of the Apple Daily newspaper on 18th June 2021, after Hong Kong police arrested the senior staff of the newspaper the day before.

Apple Daily, launched in 1995, was one of the last major Chinese-language media to still dare to publish information contradicting the Beijing regime's propaganda and to write editorials critical of its authoritarian policies, and for many years it was the target of harassment by government and pro-Beijing camps.

On 17th June 2021, approximately 500 police officers raided its headquarters and five executive staff members were arrested on suspicion of "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces", a crime that bears a life sentence under the National Security Law imposed since June 2020 by the Chinese regime. On 23rd June, Next Digital media group's board of directors announced that Apple Daily would cease all its operations due to the government's decision to freeze its financial assets, leaving the media outlet unable to pay their employees and suppliers. The newspaper shut down on 24th June.

To this day, six former employees of Apple Daily are still in detention: general manager **Cheung Kim-hung**, executive editor in chief **Lam Man-chung**, associate publisher **Chan Pui-man**, chief editor **Ryan Law**, and editorial writers **Fung Wai-kong** and **Yeung Ching-kee** (known under the pen names Lo Fung and Li Ping, respectively).



© Anthony Wallace / AFP. Police arrests deputy chief editor Chan Pui Man from the Apple Daily headquarters on 17th June 2021.

July

15th

In its annual report, the HKJA denounces the severe deterioration of press freedom, left “in tatters” by the government.

21th

Tenth former staff member of Apple Daily, executive editor-in-chief **Lam Man-chung** is arrested by police at his home and charged with “conspiracy to collude with foreign forces” under the National Security Law.

August

3rd

Hong Kong digital media outlet Initium Media announces that it will move its headquarters to Singapore, becoming the first Hong Kong news outlet to relocate overseas since the implementation of National Security Law.

9th

Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Carrie Lam says public broadcaster RTHK will partner with State-owned China Media Group (CMG) to “nurture a stronger sense of patriotism” in the territory.

September

29th

Public broadcaster RTHK adopts new editorial guidelines asking journalists to “support the government in safeguarding national security and interests”, to refrain from “provoking or deepening hatred, discrimination or hostility” towards the Hong Kong executive and Chinese government, and to avoid contact with “foreign governments or political organisations”.

October

1st

Journalists from Hong Kong’s two veteran online media outlets, Stand News and Citizen News, are denied access to Chinese National Day celebrations.

19th

HKJA announces that the Hong Kong Police Force rejected all but one out of 27 complaints they filed relating to police violence against journalists during the 2019 pro-democracy protests.

November

4th

DB Channel, an award-winning online media, ceases operation without elaborating on the reason. Co-founder Frankie Fung has been in custody since February 2021 over accusations of “conspiracy to subversion” under the National Security Law, while another co-founder Wu Gin announced in May 2021 that he had moved to Taiwan, citing personal risks.

5th

FCCHK survey results show that 84% of foreign correspondents believe that the working environment for journalists has deteriorated since the introduction of the National Security Law, and almost 50% are considering or have plans to leave the city, citing the decline in press freedom.

12th

Hong Kong immigration authorities refuse to renew a work visa for The Economist correspondent **Sue-Lin Wong** without providing an explanation.

25th

A Hong Kong court partially upholds a decision made by Hong Kong’s communications regulator against public broadcaster RTHK, stating that it presented factual inaccuracies and denigrated the police force in the satirical show “Headliner”.

December

13th

Press freedom defenders **Jimmy Lai** and **Gwyneth Ho** are sentenced to 13 months and 6 months imprisonment, respectively, for taking part in a banned assembly in Hong Kong in 2020.

28th

Hong Kong prosecutors file additional “seditious publications” charges against **Jimmy Lai** and six former Apple Daily team members under the National Security Law.

29th

Independent online media Stand News announces it will cease its operations after a police raid on its office and arrests of six current and former team members. On the same day, **Ronson Chan**, chair of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) and Stand News’ deputy assignment editor, is taken away and later released after questioning.



© Tyrone Siu / REUTERS. Police arrests Stand News chief editor Patrick Lam.

Stand News was a not-for-profit Chinese-language news site based in Hong Kong and founded in December 2014. Well-known for insightful reports about social and political issues in Hong Kong, it provided in-depth coverage of all trials related to the National Security Law, and was a nominee for the 2021 RSF Press Freedom Awards.

Exactly six months after the dismantling of the Next Digital group and its flagship newspaper Apple Daily, on the morning of 29th December, Stand News premises were raided by 200 police officers, while six of its current and former team members were arrested by the police force's National Security Department under the accusation of “conspiracy to publish seditious publications”, a colonial-era crime that bears a maximum sentence of two years in prison. Chief editors **Patrick Lam** and **Chung Pui-kuen** were soon after refused bail and will stay in custody until their trials. Later the same day, Stand News announced on social media that it would cease publication and dismiss its employees as the company's assets were frozen by the government.

2022

January

3rd

Citizen News, a Chinese-language non-profit and independent online media founded in 2017, announces its shut-down citing “drastic changes in society and the worsening of the media environment” and the need “to protect its staff”.

4th

Mad Dog Daily, online media outlet, ceases operation citing legal risks and need of protection of its staff.

12th

Chief Executive Carrie Lam says Hong Kong will create more national security laws to address the crimes of treason, secession, sedition, and subversion.

21st

Hong Kong's Registry of Trade Unions (RTU) demands answers from the HKJA on how certain events they held were relevant to their objectives, as well as information about some of its social media posts. The HKJA has previously been criticised by Secretary for Security Chris Tang for “infiltrating” university campuses by “roping in” student journalists as members.

February

7th

The Media Freedom Coalition, a group of 23 countries, expresses “deep concern” at the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese authorities’ attacks on freedom of the press and their suppression of independent local media in Hong Kong.

14th

The website of United Kingdom-based NGO Hong Kong Watch, that launched a Press Freedom Campaign calling for the release of Hong Kong journalists in custody, is blocked by several internet firms in Hong Kong.

March

1st

Local Press, Chinese-language non-profit and independent online media ceases operation without elaborating on the reason.

14th

Hong Kong Watch, which called for the release of detained Hong Kong journalists, receives a formal demand from the Hong Kong Police Force's National Security Department to remove its website, which allegedly could be “breaching the National Security Law”.

23rd

By this point, 12 journalists and press freedom defenders, including Apple Daily and Stand News senior staff, are still in custody awaiting their trials, which have again been delayed to the coming months, allegedly due to the territory's Covid-19 situation.

April

11th

Allan Au, a veteran journalist and columnist for the now defunct independent media outlet Stand News, was arrested at his residence in Hong Kong by the police force's National Security Department under the accusation of ‘conspiracy to publish seditious publication’, and later released on bail.

22nd

By this point, 13 journalists and press freedom defenders, including Apple Daily and Stand News senior staff, are still in custody awaiting their trials, which have again been delayed to the coming months, allegedly due to the territory's Covid-19 situation.

RSF REPORT

The Great Leap Backwards of Journalism in China

Released in December 2022, *The Great Leap Backwards of Journalism in China* is a damning 82-page document that demonstrates the acceleration of China's violations against its own international commitments to freedom of opinion and expression. The investigative report examines the regime's tools of repression against journalists and foreign correspondents in China and the deterioration of press freedom in Hong Kong, a territory once considered a model for press freedom. It also details Beijing's strategy to control access of information beyond its borders, while presenting appeals and recommendations to the Chinese authorities, foreign governments, international institutions, journalists, and media outlets.



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The report can be downloaded from the RSF website in twelve language versions (Arabic, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese) or through this link: <https://bit.ly/3La93cv>



REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF) promotes and defends freedom, pluralism and independence of journalism throughout the world. Based in Paris, the organisation holds a consultative status at the United Nations and UNESCO and has fourteen international bureaux and correspondents in 130 countries.

COVER PHOTO: © VERNON YUEN / AFP. Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai is arrested on suspicion of "collusion with foreign forces".

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