

MASS PROTESTS IN HONG KONG OVER PROPOSED EXTRADITION BILL

By Alex Pollock

Thousands of people in Hong Kong surrounded police headquarters [on Friday 21 June], calling for an extradition bill to be scrapped. Millions of people have marched against the bill in recent weeks, with violent clashes breaking out with police. The bill, which allows extradition to mainland China, has already been suspended. People fear that if the extradition bill passes, it would erode judicial independence and bring Hong Kong more decisively under China's control. Critics of the bill, including lawyers and rights groups, also say it leaves people in Hong Kong exposed to China's justice system, which is marred by allegations of torture, forced confessions and arbitrary detentions. *(BBC News)*



What makes Hong Kong unique?

Hong Kong is a 'special administrative region' of China, and has operated under a policy of 'one country, two systems' since 1997 when the territory was given back to China from Britain. China is responsible for Hong Kong's defence and international relations, while Hong Kong maintains limited self-governance, civil liberties, an independent judicial system, and an unrestricted press. The chief executive is under the authority of Beijing and the legislative council is widely made up of pro-Beijing lawmakers. Most residents, however, identify as 'Hongkongers' rather than as Chinese.

What is the controversial extradition bill?

The controversial bill, which consists of two amendments to existing laws, would allow Hongkongers accused of crimes to be extradited to mainland China to go through the judicial process. The law would apply to 37 crimes, all of which constitute sentences of seven or more years in jail, and would be applied to any country without a prior extradition agreement with Hong Kong. Crimes that fall under the proposed law's jurisdiction include offenses such as murder, drug trafficking, and corruption, but the law would exclude political offenses. According to proponents of the bill, offenders extradited to China would have protection against the death penalty, the right to appeal would remain intact, and there would be protection against double jeopardy. An extradition request would have to be approved by the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.

The bill, first proposed in February 2019, was suspended following mass protests on 16 June by current chief executive Carrie Lam, but the Hong Kong legislative council may still move forward with the law in the future.

Arguments for and against

Hong Kong was granted 50 years of independence from mainland China, starting in 1997, as part of the deal between China and Britain. Since the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (pro-democracy protests focused on the right to open elections), many Hongkongers believe that Beijing is trying to tighten its grip on the region. The major argument in opposition to the extradition bill is that subjecting Hongkongers to the Chinese judicial system would further tighten Beijing's grip.

Many in the international community – the UK, EU, and Canada included – have voiced concerns about China's use of the changed law. Although extradition for political offenses would not be allowed, many worry that China would attempt to silence political dissidents. The new amendments would also allow foreigners to be subject to extradition, thereby potentially harming Hong Kong's position as one of the largest business hubs in the world (foreign companies would be at greater risk of facing China's judicial system).

Those in favour of passing the bill argue that there would be sufficient safeguards in place to protect Hongkongers from unjust judicial practices. Since Hong Kong was handed back to China, there have been 260 offenders sent from mainland China to Hong Kong to face criminal charges, yet there have not been any sent from Hong Kong to China. Government officials in Hong Kong have expressed an urgent need to pass the legislation to ensure that Hong Kong does not become "a haven for criminals".

The protests

The first major protest against the extradition bill took place on 31 March, more than a month after the bill was first proposed. The protests have drawn millions into the streets of Hong Kong, and members from every area of society. Journalists, business owners, students and religious leaders have all spoken out against the bill. Analysts say they have become the most historic protests that the Hong Kong-China relationship has endured.

In the beginning, the aim of the protesters was a total withdrawal of the bill and the resignation of Ms Lam. The turning point of the protests came on 12 June when the police and protesters clashed violently. The Hong Kong police force used rubber bullets and tear gas on trapped crowds and deemed the protest a 'riot', arresting several demonstrators.

The following protest on 16 June drew over two million people (according to protest organisers), causing Ms Lam to suspend the bill -- however, she declined to withdraw it fully, further angering the protesters. Ms Lam then publicly apologised to the people for the way the bill was handled on 17 June, but this still fell short in the eyes of protesters.

After the 'riot' on 12 June, the protesters shifted their focus to the release of detained protesters and the need for an investigation into police brutality. Since the protests started, 72 people have been injured, including 21 police officers.

Joshua Wong, a Hong Kong student who became the face of the 2014 movement, has taken a leading role in the protests against the extradition bill, just a week after being released from jail (he was imprisoned on contempt charges stemming from the 2014 demonstrations).

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Quite unexpectedly, "Sing Hallelujah to the Lord" has become the unofficial 'theme song' of these protests – the simple hymn written in the 1970s is being sung repeatedly by Christians and non-Christians alike. According to *TIME Magazine*, one possible reason for this is that those meeting for the purpose of a 'religious gathering' face less of a threat of police interference, as religious meetings do not qualify as assemblies under Hong Kong ordinance.

However, there also seems to be something of a spiritual awakening happening in connection with the protests. According to a Christian ministry leader in Hong Kong, the Church's involvement in the protests is much more significant than in the past – Christian leaders in Hong Kong have been organising public prayer vigils and openly speaking out, allowing people to hear a strong, clear Christian voice in the midst of the unrest. This has elevated the profile of the Church in Hong Kong, which is also seeing increased unity between different branches and denominations. "There is a sense of spiritual breakthrough in Hong Kong," the ministry leader said. "God seems to be preparing the Church in Hong Kong to be an agent of positive change."

And while the protests are still very much contained to Hong Kong, there is also a hope that this spiritual breakthrough might somehow spill over to the mainland as well.

PRAY

- **For wisdom for both government and protest leaders**
- **For the Hong Kong Church to be an audible, influential voice among those on both sides of the protests**
- **For the renewed sense of hope in the Hong Kong Church to carry over into mainland China**

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