



香港人權資訊中心
Hong Kong Centre for
Human Rights

APRIL 2025

HONG KONG HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT 2024

Reporting Period:
January to December 2024



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Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights is established in 2022 by human rights defenders from Hong Kong with background in human rights, policy, and legal research. We aim to provide credible information on Hong Kong's legal, political, and human rights development with the goal of supporting the resilient civil society of Hong Kong and upholding international human rights standards.

Executive Summary

The Hong Kong Human Rights Report 2024, prepared by the Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights, offers a comprehensive evaluation of the human rights situation in Hong Kong amid the ongoing entrenchment of authoritarian rule under the national security regime. Drawing on developments throughout 2024, the report documents systemic patterns of repression across legal, administrative, cultural, and digital domains. It highlights a coordinated effort to dismantle the rule of law, restrict civil liberties, and isolate the city from international oversight.

Key Insights

1. Expansion of the National Security Regime

The enactment of the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO) in 2024 has significantly expanded Hong Kong's national security apparatus. Building on the 2020 National Security Law (NSL), the SNSO empowers the executive to override judicial processes, curtail fair trial guarantees, and assert extraterritorial jurisdiction. The decisions made by the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the HKSAR are explicitly binding and beyond judicial review, and the Chief Executive may issue binding national security certificates at any time.

2. Erosion of Judicial Independence and Access to Justice

The judiciary has been sidelined in national security matters, with executive authorities exerting direct influence over legal outcomes. Restrictions on legal representation, declining approval rates for legal aid, scrutiny of crowdfunding, and the imposition of punitive cost orders have fostered a hostile environment for public interest litigation. High-profile legal reprisals against civil society actors have created a chilling effect on access to justice.

3. Escalation of Surveillance and Transnational Repression

The deployment of state surveillance—both physical and digital—has intensified. In 2024, the Government expanded its CCTV infrastructure and signalled interest in AI and facial recognition technologies. Online expression remains heavily policed, with multiple sedition prosecutions targeting social media activity. Alarming, evidence has also surfaced of transnational surveillance targeting the diaspora, including a foiled intelligence operation in the United Kingdom.

4. Administrative Harassment and Indirect Suppression

Routine regulations—such as tax audits, venue restrictions, and licensing requirements—are enforced selectively to suppress dissent. Journalists, artists, educators, and community organisers have encountered increasing constraints through opaque bureaucratic decisions. These measures weaponise legality to attain political control while upholding a facade of administrative neutrality.

5. Suppression of Peaceful Assemblies and Civic Participation

Hong Kong has seen no major demonstrations since 2020. Preventive policing, selective enforcement, and the indefinite threat of prosecution have effectively neutralised protest rights. As of March 2024, over 7,300 individuals arrested in connection with the 2019 protests remain in legal limbo, facing an ongoing threat of charges without closure.

6. Increased Censorship in Cultural and Educational Spaces

Cultural expression is increasingly subject to ideological scrutiny. Concerts, plays, and book fairs have been cancelled for vague reasons, while books are removed from libraries and schools deny access to critical artists. Patriotic education is systematically integrated into the curriculum alongside new methods for monitoring ideological conformity in schools.

Recommendations

This report provides twenty-six targeted, actionable recommendations for various stakeholders, with key highlights outlined below:

1. Governments are urged to implement a rights-based foreign policy regarding Hong Kong, impose targeted export controls, support civil society and independent media, and enhance pathways for Hongkongers who wish to relocate.
2. The United Nations should enhance monitoring of Hong Kong, request country visits, document all forms of repression, and safeguard individuals who engage with UN mechanisms from reprisals.

3. Businesses and financial institutions should apply strong human rights due diligence, resist coercive legal requests, and prevent complicity in digital repression and censorship.
4. The Hong Kong and Chinese governments are urged to revoke the NSL and SNSO, release all political prisoners, cease all forms of transnational repression, restore judicial independence, and protect the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Conclusion

The findings of this report reveal that repression in Hong Kong is no longer episodic or isolated; it is systematic, entrenched in law, and increasingly transnational in scope. Despite government assertions of stability and normalcy, the lived reality is one of escalating censorship, fear, and legal retribution. Nonetheless, the resilience of Hong Kong's people remains evident in their creativity, persistence, and continued engagement, both locally and abroad.

The erosion of human rights in Hong Kong poses a significant challenge to the international community's dedication to democratic values and the rule of law. Urgent, coordinated action is necessary to support those defending human rights in the city and to avert the further normalisation of authoritarian practices under the pretence of national security.

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List of Abbreviations

CFA – Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal

ELAB – Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill

HKJA – Hong Kong Journalists Association

HKSAR – Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

ICCPR – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

LSD – League of Social Democrats

NSC – Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the HKSAR

NSL – National Security Law

SNSO – Safeguarding National Security Ordinance

UN – United Nations

Introduction

1. *Hong Kong Human Rights Report 2024* marks the second annual human rights assessment produced by the Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights following the *Hong Kong Human Rights Report 2023*¹. Since the imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, Hong Kong has experienced a sustained crackdown on civil society that has diminished the space for open debate and transparent governance. Access to vital information has become increasingly restricted, fostering an environment where accountability is undermined and human rights violations can fester.
2. The Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights was established by activists from Hong Kong following the crackdown. Our goal is to monitor the human rights situation in Hong Kong closely, providing credible information and analysis for Hongkongers and anyone wishing to contribute to the fight for human rights in the region. In this annual assessment, we identify and analyse patterns and trends of human rights violations that are particularly consequential and warrant international attention.
3. We highlight four critical aspects based on the analysis of the seven topics in this report. First, there is a general attempt to undermine the independent judiciary's role in checking the government. This includes the extensive powers granted to the executive branch under national security laws and barriers to access to justice. These actions undermine the rule of law and the protection of human rights in everyday life and business operations beyond political cases.
4. Secondly, the state's repressive measures are not confined to overt actions; they manifest in subtle forms of administrative harassment and lawfare. Routine regulations—such as tax audits and licensing checks—are selectively enforced and weaponised to silence dissent and suppress critical voices. Even legal requests can function as veiled instruments of human rights violations. Such practices cultivate a pervasive sense of helplessness within civil society, while other actors may unknowingly become complicit in rights abuses by enforcing these seemingly legitimate actions.
5. Third, censorship and ideological control in the cultural and educational sectors are intensifying. This trend, an extension of the concerning patterns identified in our 2023 report, reflects the Government's relentless pursuit to quash "soft resistance" by suppressing alternative viewpoints and restricting creative expression. Interference in education and academic freedom particularly impacts the younger generation.
6. Fourth, the people of Hong Kong have demonstrated resilience and continue to defy restrictions despite the Government's steadfast efforts to exert control and

isolate the city from international scrutiny. For instance, the section on Censorship in Arts and Cultural Activities highlights how the cultural sector has creatively adapted to heavy censorship.

7. This report serves as both a record and a warning: the entrenchment of the violations, if left unchecked, will have long-lasting consequences for the people of Hong Kong and the broader international community. It is critical that the world continues to observe, respond, and stand in solidarity with those fighting for their fundamental rights in Hong Kong. The issues raised here demand action—not just for the benefit of Hong Kong’s residents but as part of a global effort to uphold human dignity in an increasingly repressive world.
8. We have included a list of twenty-six recommendations for policymakers, the United Nations (UN), businesses and financial institutions, and the governments of Hong Kong and China. We hope this report will contribute to a constructive dialogue.

Trends and Patterns of Rights Suppression

9. Building on our continuous monitoring of developments in Hong Kong throughout 2024, this section presents our in-depth investigation into emerging patterns and trends of human rights violations. Drawing on publicly available information, we have identified and analysed the most urgent challenges—ranging from the expansion of the national security framework to the suppression of peaceful assembly and the erosion of judicial safeguards. Through this approach, we aim to reveal the gravity and depth of the crisis facing fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, providing clear evidence of a sustained and systematic crackdown on rights.

Expansion of the National Security Regime

10. Hong Kong's national security framework experienced a significant expansion in 2024 following the enactment of the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO). Building on the 2020 NSL, the SNSO extends the statutory ambit of national security measures through broader and more discretionary legal provisions and reconfigures the balance of power between state institutions and civil society.
11. We identified four critical dimensions in the expansion of the security framework: the legislative consolidation of the security architecture, the broadening scope of security authority, the imposition of civil society controls via administrative bodies, and the extension of extraterritorial reach.

National Security Framework Strengthened by the New Legislation

12. Hong Kong's SNSO came into effect in March 2024 under Article 23 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The legislative process, which included public consultation and scrutiny by the "patriot-only" Legislative Council, was hastily completed within two months. The SNSO imposes harsh penalties for a wide range of offences, enhances the national security framework established by the 2020 NSL, expands national security's legal scope, and reconfigures the balance of power between state authorities and civil society.

13. A range of human rights observers—including UN Special Rapporteurs² and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights³—have expressed serious concerns about the SNSO. They caution that it would significantly and unduly limit the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms and is incompatible with the International Bill of Human Rights. Special Rapporteurs indicated that the SNSO does not meet the precision requirements outlined in Article 15(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Its expansive definitions and discretionary powers could enable arbitrary application against journalists, activists, and the broader civil society. The High Commissioner warned that this law could be misused to suppress dissent, thus undermining freedoms of expression and association.
14. While the Government refuses to disclose enforcement data of the SNSO citing “security considerations,” available evidence indicates that enforcement has been swift and substantial. In the nine months of its implementation, at least 16 individuals have been arrested under it, four charged, and 13 more individuals are subject to outstanding warrants. In 2024 alone, three convictions for speech-related offences resulted in custodial sentences ranging from 10 to 14 months.

The Ascendancy of National Security Authority

15. The SNSO reinforces the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the HKSAR (NSC) institutional supremacy established under the NSL. The SNSO section 112 reassures that any individual performing a public function under HKSAR law must adhere to and implement the NSC’s judgements and decisions. It adds on Article 14 of the NSL, which states that “[d]ecisions made by the Committee shall not be amenable to judicial review”.
16. The SNSO also expanded the situations in which the Chief Executive may issue a certificate that can bind the court. Section 115 of the SNSO grants the Chief Executive the authority to certify that a matter pertains to national security, not just in relation to a case currently under adjudication by the court as prescribed in Article 47 of the NSL. Courts must accept such certificates without question.
17. These provisions effectively insulate NSC’s decisions from judicial review, consolidate executive authority and redefine governance by prioritising national security considerations above the established systems of separation of powers and checks and balances.
18. Two illustrative cases are presented here to demonstrate the NSC’s significant influence over Hong Kong’s legal framework.
19. Ma Chun-man, who was convicted of an NSL offence for “inciting secession” through his slogans, statements and placards, and sentenced to five years in

prison, was initially approved for early release. However, this decision was reversed on 23 May 2024 after the SNSO came into force.⁴

20. Section 163 of the SNSO prohibits remission unless the Commissioner of Correctional Services is satisfied that it will not jeopardise national security. Although Ma's early release was granted before the SNSO was enacted, the Ordinance applies regardless of when sentencing or release decisions are made. Following a directive from the NSC, the Commissioner revoked Ma's early release. The court dismissed Ma's subsequent legal challenge, affirming that the NSC's decision is binding and that his continued incarceration is lawful.
21. Similarly, Kinson Cheung King-sang, the former chair of the University of Hong Kong's student union, was denied early release. Cheung faced charges of "promoting terrorism" under the NSL for endorsing a knife attack on the police, later pleading guilty to inciting bodily harm under Cap. 212 of the Offences Against the Person Ordinance. He was subsequently sentenced to 15 months' imprisonment.⁵
22. Cheung filed for *habeas corpus*, requesting a court to rule that his continued detention without early release was unlawful. The NSC then determined that his case was linked to national security and concluded that granting him early release would conflict with national security imperatives. The court confirmed that no Hong Kong jurisdiction – including the judiciary – may override NSC decisions.
23. In both scenarios, NSC directives took precedence over standard legal processes. These developments highlight how the SNSO redefines the balance of power, granting the executive and its security apparatus the final say in matters traditionally within the judicial domain. For further analysis of how this undermines fair trial rights and judicial independence, see paragraphs 36–40.

Administrative Integration of Security Framework

24. Integrating national security considerations into administrative governance signifies a significant extension of state control over civil society.
25. National security compliance clauses are increasingly integrated into Government procurement and leasing policies. For instance, a 2024 amendment to the procurement policy for operating contracts near Kwun Tong Promenade authorises the Government to disqualify any bidder who is suspected—whether in the past, present, or reasonably believed—to have engaged in acts that "may lead to or constitute offences endangering national security."⁶ A similar clause was introduced in 2023 in government land sale tenders⁷. These provisions do not require any conviction or formal charge, granting the authorities broad discretionary power to cancel contracts based on untested suspicions. Given the

broad interpretation of “endangering national security” under Hong Kong law, such clauses serve as pretexts to exclude or penalise politically undesirable actors.

26. Such clauses have proliferated beyond government operations and now apply to non-governmental events. Major public events, such as the Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon 2025 and Hong Kong Sevens 2025, are required to include national security commitments in their agreements. Under these terms, organisers must ensure that no activities or behaviours associated with the event “involve or are reasonably likely to involve offences endangering national security.”⁸ The burden is effectively placed on private organisers to pre-emptively censor participants and content based on the vague and politically charged definition of “national security” in Hong Kong.
27. We argue that these clauses demonstrate over-securitisation rather than being rooted in public safety concerns. Worse still, civil servants and organisers—fearing regulatory reprisals—are incentivised to adopt overly cautious or restrictive practices, which often lead to the cancellation of partnerships, the disinvitation of speakers, or the imposition of broad participant restrictions to avoid attracting scrutiny. Consequently, national security obligations are weaponised as administrative tools of censorship, creating a significant disincentive for engagement with civil society, dissenting voices, or politically sensitive topics.

Extraterritorial Reach of the Security Framework

28. The expansion of Hong Kong’s national security regime in 2024 has intensified the climate of fear among Hongkongers overseas. While the 2020 NSL already claimed extraterritorial effect, the SNSO further entrenches the state’s reach beyond its borders by introducing new offences and broader enforcement powers.
29. Among these is the offence of “external interference endangering national security,” (sections 52–57, SNSO) a charge that can be applied without requiring proof that national security was actually harmed, making it dangerously vague and open to misuse. Section 6 of the SNSO expands the definition of “external forces” to include not only foreign governments, but also political parties and international organisations—heightening the risk that even symbolic or indirect links with overseas entities could trigger criminal investigation.
30. Authorities have already applied national security laws to acts committed abroad. In March 2023, a university student was arrested upon returning to Hong Kong from Japan for online posts made while overseas. Initially accused of inciting secession under the NSL, she was ultimately charged under the sedition

law and sentenced to two months in prison.⁹ The SNSO has since increased the maximum penalties for sedition, amplifying its deterrent effect.¹⁰

31. In 2024, the Government issued fresh arrest warrants and HK\$1 million bounties for six political figures based overseas.¹¹ Separately, it invoked SNSO provisions to apply heightened measures against seven individuals who already have bounties on their heads due to alleged violations of the NSL, including passport cancellation, prohibition from dealing with funds in Hong Kong, and suspension of licenses to practise law.¹² To date, 19 individuals are wanted by Hong Kong police in connection with national security offences.
32. The reach of enforcement into the digital sphere continues. In October 2024, police issued a takedown request to a U.S.-based web host targeting Flow HK¹³, a diaspora media outlet, on national security grounds. Such actions risk drawing foreign companies into complicity.
33. These developments reflect a growing institutionalisation of transnational repression. Since 2020, the national security regime has blurred legal boundaries to suppress dissent beyond Hong Kong. In 2024, that reach has only deepened—through expanded laws, harsher penalties, and increased pressure on individuals and platforms outside the city.

Obstructing Access to Justice

34. When other avenues of democratic oversight—such as free elections for the Chief Executive and legislature—are constrained, the judiciary becomes the critical check on government power in Hong Kong. Judicial review has long been a primary channel for individuals and civil society to challenge government actions and defend fundamental rights. However, in 2024, a notable decline in judicial reviews indicates that structural barriers deter potential litigants, undermining the judiciary's role as an effective safeguard of accountability.
35. In the following sections, we examine how executive overrides, restrictions on legal representation, tightened legal aid rules, and potential reprisals converge to weaken access to justice. These factors contribute to a system where those seeking to uphold their rights in court face mounting procedural and financial obstacles, coupled with a growing risk of reprisal for taking legal action.

Erosion of Judicial Independence in National Security Matters

36. In 2024, the executive's influence over the judiciary became more pronounced, limiting the courts' ability to act as an effective check on government actions.

This trend was most evident in national security cases, where the executive could override judicial decisions, often through the use of executive certificates.

37. As detailed in the section above, Expansion of the National Security Regime, the SNSO section 112 established that decisions made by the NSC are binding on all public officers, including judges. This effectively shields national security matters from judicial scrutiny, ensuring that courts cannot review or challenge national security decisions. Moreover, Section 115 of the SNSO grants the Chief Executive the power to issue certificates stating that a matter involves national security, which courts must accept. The SNSO complements the NSL, consolidating the executive's control over national security-related judicial matters.
38. A key example in 2024 was the *Glory to Hong Kong* injunction appeal decision¹⁴. The Court of Appeal overturned the lower court's decision not to grant an injunction to prohibit playing the influential protest song despite having been presented with a certificate by the Chief Executive under NSL Article 47, declaring that the protest song posed a threat to national security. The Court of Appeal granted the injunction, emphasising deference to the executive's national security assessment.¹⁵
39. In a separate *habeas corpus* application¹⁶ concerning the remission of a young man, Kinson Cheung King-sang, the Chief Executive intervened by certifying that the case involved a national security issue pursuant to section 115 of the SNSO, resulting in the presiding judge being replaced with a designated national security judge; furthermore, the NSC issued a decision during the proceeding that giving the applicant early release would not benefit Hong Kong's national security. The judge then stated that the NSC's decision bound her, quashed the application and ordered the applicant to pay costs to the Correctional Services Department.¹⁷
40. By unilaterally deciding which matters involve national security—and by issuing decisions that courts must accept—the executive effectively supersedes judicial independence. This authority is not limited to traditionally understood security issues, giving the Government broad latitude to avoid meaningful judicial oversight. In doing so, it weakens the judiciary's role as the primary guardian of fundamental rights, leaving the executive's powers largely unchecked and raising serious concerns about the erosion of the rule of law.

Restricting Free Choice of Legal Representation

41. In 2024, the right to instruct a lawyer of one's choice came under renewed pressure, particularly in cases deemed to involve national security. Section 79 of the SNSO empowers the police, upon obtaining a magistrate's warrant, to bar specific lawyers from representing clients if such representation is deemed to endanger national security or hinder an investigation. UN human rights experts

noted in a communication in 2024¹⁸ that these provisions risk arbitrarily impede an individual's access to a lawyer of their choosing, given the breadth of the term "national security".

42. Furthermore, there is an apparent lack of any right to appeal the police's decision, whether for the individual concerned or the excluded lawyer. This creates a strong deterrent effect within the legal community as lawyers may avoid sensitive cases to protect their professional standing or to avert further scrutiny.
43. Such constraints contravene international standards. Article 14(3) of the ICCPR explicitly protects the right of accused persons to communicate freely with counsel of their choosing and to have sufficient time to prepare their defence. The Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment No. 32, has also underscored that prompt, confidential access to a lawyer is a safeguard against potential abuse.
44. Even outside national security matters, previous reforms of publicly funded legal aid already limit defendants' freedom to select their lawyers if they rely on legal assistance.¹⁹ Consequently, defendants in politically sensitive cases face narrowing options for legal representation, undermining both the right to a fair trial and the broader integrity of Hong Kong's legal system.

Barriers to Legal Aid and Funding for Judicial Review

45. In Hong Kong, a barrier to access to justice is money. Hong Kong does not permit "no win, no fee" arrangements, leaving litigants reliant on legal aid or private financing. In 2024, constraints intensified, exacerbating existing obstacles to public interest litigation.
46. The most common pathways to fund judicial reviews include legal aid, self-financing, pro bono representation, and crowdfunding. Yet, legal aid approvals have plummeted to a record low: Of the 36 legal aid applications for judicial reviews challenging government policies submitted in 2023, only two were approved—a success rate of just 5.6%, significantly lower than the 15.6% average between 2016 and 2022. (See Figure 1) Meanwhile, NGOs faced increasing pressure and restricted access to financial resources, and crowdfunding efforts came under greater scrutiny²⁰, discouraging many would-be contributors.
47. Against dwindling resources, we are concerned about costs orders against applicants who seek to uphold rights. A striking example is the 2024 legal costs order against Chow Hang-tung, who sought to intervene in the *Glory to Hong Kong* injunction. Despite the Secretary for Justice publicly inviting concerned parties to participate, Chow's attempt was blocked, and she was ordered to pay HK\$ 100,000 as costs to the Government.²¹ This episode not only imposed an immediate financial burden on Chow but also highlighted the risk of adverse

costs orders that can deter other prospective applicants from pursuing judicial reviews. In the afore mentioned case of Kinson Cheung King-sang, the undergraduate was also ordered to pay the Government's hefty costs in his *habeas corpus* application. Legal scholar Johannes Chan criticised the costs order as unjust.²²

Figure 1. Legal Aid Applications for Judicial Review of Government Policies and Related Matters

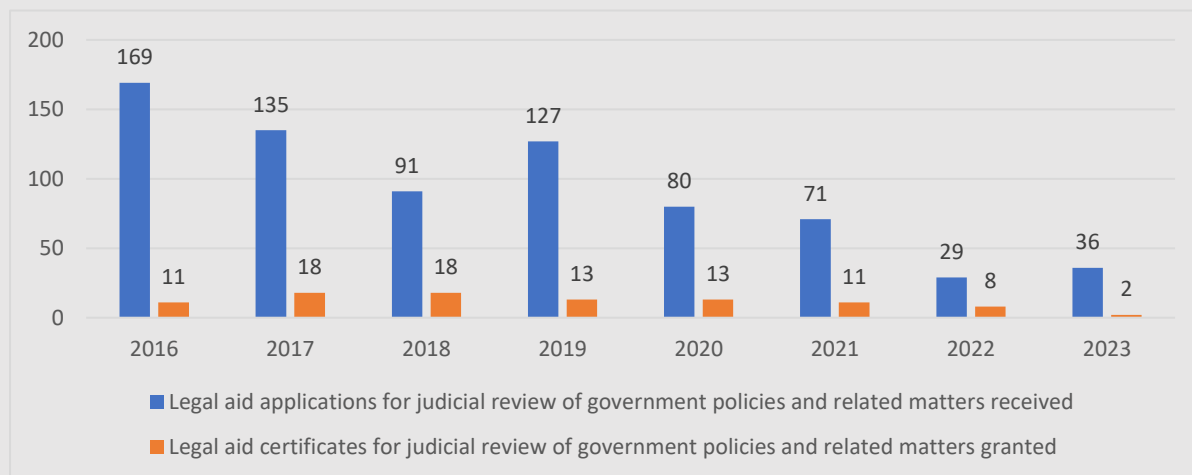


Table 1. Legal Aid Applications for Judicial Review of Government Policies and Related Matters

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Legal aid applications received	169	135	91	127	80	71	29	36
Legal aid certificates granted	11 (6.5%)	18 (13.3%)	18 (19.8%)	13 (10.2%)	13 (16.3%)	11 (15.5%)	8 (27.6%)	2 (5.6%)

48. Taken together, declining legal aid approvals, mounting pressure on NGOs, heightened restrictions on crowdfunding, and the risk of high costs contribute to a hostile environment for public interest litigation. The resulting shortfall in funding and support undermines one of Hong Kong's few remaining checks on executive power, effectively narrowing the space for holding authorities accountable through the courts.

Deterring Legal Action to Protect or Uphold Rights

49. In 2024, concerns grew that government or pro-regime actors might discourage judicial reviews through intimidation—particularly by creating a climate of fear around legal challenges. While no definitive proof exists of a coordinated campaign, certain patterns indicate a chilling effect. Individuals who file judicial reviews or otherwise oppose official policies increasingly worry about potential reprisals, reducing their willingness to seek legal remedies.

50. Two high-profile incidents illustrate why such apprehension has taken hold. In November 2023, frequent judicial review litigant Kwok Cheuk-kin challenged the

all-patriots District Council nomination system. He was subsequently arrested in June 2024 on allegations of welfare-related fraud dating back to 2013–2022²³, raising suspicions of retaliatory timing. Similarly, environmental advocate Tse Sai-kit, who contested the Government’s environmental impact assessment for the San Tin Technopole, faced hostile coverage by pro-government media. In January 2025, he, too, was arrested for alleged fraud in subsidy applications²⁴, furthering the perception that taking on public interest cases invites legal scrutiny beyond the norm. In both cases, Kwok Cheuk-kin and Tse Sai-kit have been under police bail since the arrest; no prosecution has been made in relation to the allegations against them.

51. Although the Legal Aid Department has historically referred suspected misrepresentations to the police, these two high-profile arrests and the media portrayal beforehand have cast doubt on whether official processes are being selectively used to target outspoken individuals. Such doubts only amplify the chilling effect: other potential litigants may be deterred from filing judicial reviews for fear of facing similar legal or reputational consequences.
52. This dynamic seriously threatens public interest litigation, long regarded as a cornerstone of accountability. If activists, community leaders, or ordinary citizens come to believe that challenging government decisions could trigger invasive investigations or unwarranted arrests, the right to access justice is effectively undermined. This risk is particularly acute in an environment where civic space is already shrinking, and critical voices often face heightened pressure.
53. While no court has ruled that the arrests are retaliatory, their timing and the surrounding publicity warrant close monitoring. Future cases must be scrutinised carefully to ensure that legal processes remain fair, impartial, and free from any intentional use of intimidation against those seeking to uphold their rights.

Failure to Respect Court Decisions

54. Despite judicial rulings intended to safeguard fundamental rights, the Hong Kong Government has repeatedly taken steps that undermine or delay their implementation. Such inaction or restrictive measures undercut the rule of law and obstruct access to justice, depriving affected individuals and groups of the remedies courts have recognised.
55. One prominent example of the Government’s failure to respect court decisions involves reporter Bao Choy’s case.²⁵ Choy, a freelancer for public broadcaster RTHK then, was producing a documentary on the 2019 Yuen Long attacks. To investigate the violent assault on protesters and train travellers—a routine journalistic practice—she accessed public vehicle registration records. Although this method had been accepted in the past, she was convicted of making a false statement when obtaining the records.²⁶ Choy appealed her conviction to the

Court of Final Appeal (CFA), which reaffirmed in its decision in 2023 that investigative journalism is protected by freedom of expression²⁷, ultimately quashing her conviction. Rather than upholding this ruling, however, the Government swiftly introduced new vehicle registry rules in January 2024²⁸. These guidelines grant the Transport Commissioner broad discretion by requiring journalists to provide “adequate and detailed justification” and allow rejections on national security grounds without a clear timeline. As of March 2024, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) reported zero successful applications under these new rules, forcing it to file another judicial review to challenge the new rules²⁹. The HKJA now shoulders additional legal costs simply to uphold a right the CFA had already guaranteed.

56. Another instance is the lack of progress on same-sex relationship recognition. In *Sham Tsz Kit v Secretary for Justice*³⁰, the CFA ordered the Government to develop an alternative framework for the legal recognition of same-sex couples and the protection of their basic social rights within two years, i.e. by October 2025. Regrettably, the Government has yet to announce any concrete proposal or even begin public consultation by the end of 2024, effectively denying a timely remedy to LGBTQ+ communities awaiting recognition of their relationships.
57. In these examples, what should be a definitive judicial remedy instead prompts further procedural hurdles, stalling the impact of legally binding decisions. By ignoring or circumventing final judgments, the Government sends a troubling signal that court rulings can be sidestepped, jeopardising both faith in the judiciary and the principle that no one—government included—is above the law.

Proliferation of Surveillance Technologies and Measures

58. This section examines how Hong Kong’s state surveillance system has evolved to include traditional physical monitoring and online spaces’ increasingly pervasive digital oversight. It also investigates the extension of these surveillance tactics beyond national borders, with transnational operations targeting diaspora communities. These developments demonstrate the state’s growing capacity to control public discourse and suppress dissent across various spheres.

Increasing Physical and Digital Surveillance

59. The state’s monitoring capabilities have significantly expanded in recent years. The increasing deployment of surveillance technologies is ostensibly justified for maintaining public order.
60. In 2024, the Government rolled out a territory-wide plan to install 2,000 new CCTV cameras in public spaces, ostensibly to combat crime. It also signalled intentions

to expand this network further in the coming years, in addition to the existing surveillance infrastructure. While an official document³¹ stated that these cameras currently lack advanced tracking functions, the Police Force is already exploring the feasibility of integrating artificial intelligence, and the Secretary for Security has shown interest in facial recognition technology³². Together, these actions establish the foundation for an extensive network of state monitoring.

61. Despite the Government's ongoing expansion of surveillance systems, there has been no corresponding regulation or privacy protections increase. The existing legal framework, particularly the Privacy Ordinance, has long been criticised for its inadequacy, raising significant doubts about its ability to effectively safeguard citizens' rights—especially when police invoke national security grounds to justify surveillance measures.
62. The Hong Kong police have long used the tactic of overt video recording at protests as a deterrent to free expression. However, in 2024, we began to see its application at sports events rather than at protest sites, a particularly troubling escalation: at a local football match³³, over a dozen police officers were deployed to monitor and film spectators, ultimately leading to the arrest of three individuals—one of whom was subsequently prosecuted for allegedly breaching the National Anthem Ordinance. Such high-visibility surveillance tactics continue to create a climate of fear, discouraging even lawful activities and eroding citizens' willingness to express themselves in settings that have historically been free from direct law enforcement scrutiny.

Social Media Surveillance by the Government

63. Alongside expanded physical surveillance, the digital realm has become a crucial front for state surveillance. The Government has increasingly monitored online activities, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, LIHKG (a forum site based in Hong Kong), and Telegram. Since the revival of the sedition offence in 2020, a total of 41 prosecutions have been recorded, with 29 cases involving online expressions.
64. Under the now-replaced sedition law, law enforcement initiated at least 37 sedition-related prosecutions, with 27 cases specifically involving digital content.³⁴ These included social media posts and blog entries critical of the Government or supportive of pro-democracy movements.
65. Of the four SNSO-related sedition prosecutions we recorded in 2024, two were directly related to social media posts. Both cases involved allegations of publishing seditious content intended to incite hatred, contempt, or disaffection toward the Hong Kong and Chinese governments. The posts included slogans such as "*Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times*," "*Down with the Communist*

Party,” and expressions of support for Taiwan independence. One individual was sentenced to 14 months of imprisonment after receiving reduction 7-months’ reduction for pleading guilty; the other case remains pending.

66. These cases—and the harsh sentences imposed—demonstrate that online political expression, even without any incitement to violence, has become an increasingly prominent target of surveillance and prosecution. This trend underscores the growing use of digital monitoring and technology-driven enforcement as tools to suppress free expression and stifle political dissent in the online sphere, marking a deepening crackdown on internet freedom.

Transnational State Surveillance Against Diaspora Community

67. Recent evidence confirms that state surveillance now extends beyond its borders. In one case, two dual Chinese–British citizens and one British citizen were charged under Britain’s National Security Act for allegedly assisting Hong Kong’s foreign intelligence service³⁵. The alleged illicit activities – which included intelligence gathering, malicious surveillance, fraudulent operations, and forced entry – targeted Hong Kong residents in the United Kingdom, particularly those already under scrutiny by the Hong Kong government. A detailed surveillance report featuring photographs of protesters in the UK was recovered from the mobile devices of the accused, with the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London reportedly paying approximately HK\$ 930,000 (~US\$120,000) for these services.
68. Similarly, activist-in-exile Simon Cheng Man-kit, a former UK consulate staff member in Hong Kong, reported being followed while meeting with UK–China Transparency representatives in central London. He noted that he and his companion were persistently shadowed by a Mandarin-speaking mother-son pair in a nearby café. Such incidents highlight the transnational dimension of Hong Kong’s security framework and the chilling effect it has on diaspora communities who fear they may be monitored or harassed even while living abroad. (See also paragraphs 28–33 above)

Irregular Tactics of Harassment and Indirect Regulatory Measures

69. This section examines the irregular harassment and indirect regulatory measures directed at journalists and civil society. Media professionals have faced systematic intimidation through anonymous threats and unlawful doxing designed to induce self-censorship. At the same time, targeted tax audits from the Government have been used as an administrative tool. Furthermore, civil

society organisations and public events have been scrutinised for minor infractions—such as noise complaints and licensing issues—that also serve as instruments of control.

Harassment and Administrative Measures Against Journalists

70. Beyond direct surveillance, the state and its associated actors have escalated their use of irregular tactics to suppress dissenting voices, particularly impacting journalists who face some of the most disturbing repercussions. An investigation conducted by the HKJA from June to August 2024 uncovered widespread intimidation of media professionals, including anonymous threats from individuals identifying themselves as “patriots” who demand editorial compliance with state narratives³⁶. Systematic doxing has also emerged as a prevalent tool: despite recent amendments purportedly outlawing such activities, the Privacy Commissioner’s office has conducted limited follow-up, and the police have made no arrests, underscoring the lack of effective recourse for those targeted.
71. Journalists are not the only victims. Individuals who are known for their critical stance or commentary are subject to direct harassment too. For example, writer Pazu (薯伯伯)’s experience was reported by the news. Known for his social commentary, was heckled by masked individuals at his book-sharing sessions. The hecklers also harassed people attending the events. The harassment sustained despite police presence.³⁷
72. In parallel, the Government has utilised administrative controls to burden critical organisations financially—a tactic widely recognised in international human rights discourse as administrative harassment. For example, in 2024, the HKJA was subjected to a tax audit concerning HK\$ 450,000 (~US\$ 58,000) from the 2017/18 financial year³⁸. Similarly, the Democratic Party faced a tax dispute in 2022 totalling approximately HK\$ 1 million (~US\$ 130,000)³⁹. While tax audits are legally permissible, their selective and disproportionate application against groups perceived as critical highlights how routine procedures can become instruments of intimidation, effectively draining resources and deterring dissent.

Indirect Harassment: Targeting Public Spaces and Cultural Events

73. Beyond targeting journalists and political groups, the Government’s heightened scrutiny has expanded to cultural and civic events. Under the guise of indirect regulatory and administrative measures, officials frequently cite minor infractions—such as noise complaints or alleged licensing issues—as pretexts to intervene. This approach effectively limits free expression and contributes to the broader pattern of lawfare by weaponising ordinary regulations.

74. Two prominent incidents illustrate how these tactics operate in practice. At a live concert outside a local bookstore, activist and artist Denise Ho Wan-see—a vocal critic of the Government at the UN Human Rights Council and one of the arrested trustees of the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund—faced an abrupt intervention by more than a dozen police officers⁴⁰. Citing noise complaints, the officers immediately shut down the event and recorded the personal details of all attendees. Similarly, a bazaar to celebrate Pride Month was cancelled after the Government informed the organisers that they did not have a licence to hold the activity, and told the venue operator not to lease the venue to the group.⁴¹ However, the CFA ruled in 2014 that if the organiser has no right to control entry to the venue, the licensing requirement should not apply.⁴² Also, the same organisers had held similar events in previous years without being required to obtain a licence. It appears unjustified that the Government interfered on this ground.
75. Through tax audits, alleged licensing violations, and selective enforcement of nominal regulations, Hong Kong authorities systematically undermine journalists' independence and restrict civil society engagement. Although these tactics may seem legally valid in principle, their targeted application represents a broader pattern of administrative harassment or "lawfare," allowing the state to impose financial burdens, chill public expression, and erode fundamental freedoms—often without the apparent arrests or overt force that might provoke immediate international condemnation.

Crackdown on Freedom of Assembly and Protest

76. In 2024, the right to peaceful assembly in Hong Kong came under intensified pressure through a coordinated system of legal and preventive controls. Authorities have combined ongoing prosecutions, selective enforcement, and pre-emptive policing to deter participation in public gatherings. This multifaceted approach – marked by its discriminatory application and chilling effect – has sharply reduced the space for public expression and raises serious concerns under international human rights standards.

Strategic Criminalisation and Indefinite Threat of Prosecution

77. The authorities' reliance on criminal and administrative charges as a deterrent became more pronounced in 2024. Members of the League of Social Democrats (LSD) were repeatedly prosecuted for minor infringements under municipal regulations—such as "fundraising without a permit" and "displaying posters without permission"—while holding street booths in Causeway Bay and Wan Chai between April and May 2023.⁴³ Although these rules may seem routine, their

selective enforcement against LSD members reflects a deliberate strategy to discourage political expression in public spaces.

78. Individual protesters have also faced increased scrutiny. In a widely publicised case, Chan Ki-kau (commonly known as “陳伯”), a pro-democracy activist in his seventies and a member of the “Protect Our Kids” group since 2019, was charged with “displaying a banner in a country park without a permit.”⁴⁴ The requirement for this permit appears to be rarely enforced. Chan’s banner—a traditional Chinese couplet urging resilience—contained no explicit political content.⁴⁵ Although he was ultimately acquitted, the prosecution underscores how administrative regulations can be selectively enforced to penalise perceived dissent, even when the expression is neither violent nor overtly political.
79. We also observe the deterrent effect of the indefinite threat of prosecution for participants in the 2019 protests. According to Security Bureau figures⁴⁶, over 7,300 of the 10,279 individuals arrested in 2019 in connection with the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) protest movement remain without formal charges as of March 2024—effectively left in limbo.⁴⁷ They have received no indication of whether they will be prosecuted or exonerated, creating a sustained climate of uncertainty.
80. Police officials often refer to these pending cases as “under processing,” implying an eventual resolution. However, the lack of a definitive charge or closure allows authorities to maintain the possibility of legal action indefinitely. This tactic exerts continuous pressure on those who participated in the protests, many of whom avoid public activities for fear that past or future allegations could be activated at any moment.
81. The deterrent effect is strengthened by a legal framework that imposes severe penalties for broadly defined offences, such as “rioting” or “unauthorised assembly,” which carry prison terms of up to ten and five years, respectively, even for peaceful protesters who did not engage in any violent acts. Notably, at least one new charge was filed in 2024 against a former protester, highlighting how the threat of prosecution lingers years after the original incidents.⁴⁸ Under these conditions, individuals live under a constant cloud of potential legal jeopardy, significantly discouraging them from exercising their right to peaceful assembly and other forms of public participation.
82. In addition to prosecutorial tactics aimed at past protests, authorities have adopted various pre-emptive measures designed to deter new assemblies.

Prevention and Control of Public Gatherings

83. Our analysis indicates that the implementation of pre-emptive policing tactics is particularly evident during politically sensitive dates. On June 4th (the anniversary

of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown) and July 1st (the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China), law enforcement maintained a heightened presence in areas traditionally associated with public assembly, conducting random stop-and-search operations and ID checks.⁴⁹ These operations led to arrests: according to police statements, on June 4th, four individuals aged 23 to 69 were arrested in Wan Chai and North Point. Charges included serious national security offences under section 24 of the SNSO for "seditious intent-related crimes" against a 68-year-old woman who allegedly chanted slogans in a public area, as well as charges of assaulting police officers and disorderly conduct in public places against others.⁵⁰ Among those arrested, only the 24-year-old man was later prosecuted for allegedly assaulting police officers in Causeway Bay during the June 4th commemoration.⁵¹ These actions effectively create zones of deterrence, discouraging even individual expressions of commemoration or dissent.

84. The impact of this preventive strategy is evident in the systematic absence of public gatherings. There have been no large-scale demonstrations in Hong Kong for four consecutive years, including traditional events like the Labor Day march, June 4th commemoration, and July 1st demonstrations. While law enforcement officials assert that they have not rejected any protest applications since 2022, this claim obscures how deterrence functions through informal channels rather than explicit prohibitions.⁵²

85. The enforcement pattern reveals clear distinctions in treating various types of assemblies. While we observed that several labour-related protests, such as workers' sit-ins over unpaid wages, proceeded with relatively little interference and that state-sanctioned events continued unimpeded, authorities imposed immediate restrictions on other public gatherings. Two marketplaces scheduled during the sensitive period of July 1 faced cancellation due to administrative requirements, demonstrating how date-specific restrictions (restrictions specifically applied during politically significant dates) effectively limit public gatherings regardless of their nature.⁵³

Noncompliance with International Standards

86. Such practices contradict international standards, especially Article 21 of the ICCPR and the UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 37.⁵⁴ The Committee emphasises that restrictions must not be discriminatory and that authorities must uphold content neutrality in their approach to peaceful assemblies. In its 2022 Concluding Observations on Hong Kong, the Committee specifically raised concerns about the "*de facto* authorisation system for public assemblies". It recommended revising relevant legislation to align with international standards.⁵⁵

87. The cumulative effect of these measures – persistent prosecution, preventive control, and date-specific restrictions – creates a comprehensive system of deterrence that significantly undermines the essence of the right to peaceful assembly. This violates General Comment No. 37, which requires states to “allow such assemblies to take place without unwarranted interference” and to “facilitate the exercise of the right and protect the participants”.

Censorship in Arts and Cultural Activities

88. Hong Kong’s arts and cultural landscape has faced increasing restrictions through a systematic approach to regulating creative expression. This control functions through both institutional mechanisms and informal pressure, extending beyond specific cultural activities to include all public spaces. When assessed against international human rights standards, these restrictions raise significant concerns regarding freedom of artistic expression and cultural rights.

89. This trend builds on developments documented in our Hong Kong Human Rights Report 2023, which highlighted the censorship of movies and public library materials.⁵⁶ In 2024, we observed this pattern persist and, in some respects, worsen. Newly reported instances of cancelled cultural events suggest possible political intervention.

90. This section examines how this systematic control manifests through various channels: financial measures aimed at traditional arts platforms, direct intervention in cultural events, restrictions on books and literary activities, and legal actions that limit creative expression. These measures have fostered a pervasive chilling effect within the cultural sector, although creative practitioners have demonstrated remarkable resilience in adapting to these constraints.

Institutional Control and Financial Pressure

91. Direct intervention in cultural events intensified in 2024, often cloaked in administrative or contractual terms. Multiple concerts and performances faced last-minute cancellations, citing “force majeure”—ostensibly referring to unforeseeable circumstances. In several instances, political motivations seemed to drive these decisions.⁵⁷ For example, the academy cancelled the graduation show at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, which featured the play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, shortly before its scheduled performance, citing “legal risks” should the play be staged.⁵⁸

92. A further illustration is the experience of the theatre group “Fire Makes Us Human”.⁵⁹ Just before its scheduled performances, the Education Bureau reportedly urged the secondary school hosting the event to withdraw its lease,

citing the bureau's national security guidelines. Acclaimed playwright Candace Chong Mui-ngam, who assisted the group, noted that authorities referenced certain members' "inappropriate comments" on social media in 2019 about the protest movement as a reason for halting the performances.⁶⁰

93. The Education Bureau wields authority because the school operates under a direct-subsidy scheme, placing it under the bureau's jurisdiction.⁶¹ Similar compliance requirements likely apply to other government-subsidised venues, effectively granting official bodies considerable influence over which cultural programs proceed and which do not.

94. The Government introduced a pilot scheme allowing arts groups to use school venues for rehearsals.⁶² However, applicants must sign undertakings affirming compliance with national security requirements. Although it is promoted as a measure to support the arts, the scheme effectively layers another vetting mechanism onto the cultural sector, making venue access contingent upon adherence to broadly defined and vaguely interpreted security protocols.

Restrictions on Literary Freedom and Publications

95. Control over books and literary activities has taken multiple forms, ranging from official restrictions to surveillance. In 2024, public libraries continued to remove books from their collections, and book fairs faced pressure to withdraw specific titles, including eight works by various authors at commercial book fairs and works by prominent writers at art book fairs.⁶³ Meanwhile, independent bookstores encountered further interference: police recorded customers' identities after a bookstore displayed signs with the code "35/5" for June 4th, alongside anonymous complaints that forced the cancellation of a book fair at a school.⁶⁴ Even author-sharing sessions were disrupted by unidentified individuals, creating an atmosphere of intimidation within the literary community.⁶⁵

96. Aside from these censorship measures, legal tools have also been utilised to restrict creative expression. A notable example is the injunction obtained against the protest anthem *Glory to Hong Kong*. This court order illustrates how judicial mechanisms can limit cultural expression, especially when content is seen as politically sensitive or critical of government policy.⁶⁶ (see paragraph 38)

Impact on Cultural Rights and Adaptation

97. These censorship measures violate international human rights standards, particularly Article 19 of the ICCPR and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which safeguard freedom of expression and the right to participate in cultural life. In its 2022 Concluding Observations, the UN Human Rights Committee explicitly condemned the

removal of books from library collections under the guise of national security and called for the immediate cessation of such practices.⁶⁷

98. Nevertheless, the cultural sector has shown considerable adaptability and resilience. When confronted with venue cancellations, some organisations have shifted to online platforms. For example, in 2024, the HKJA had to convert its fundraising concert into a virtual event after the sold-out physical show was abruptly cancelled on alleged “force majeure” grounds.⁶⁸
99. Other creative professionals have sought opportunities outside Hong Kong when local avenues became inaccessible. For example, sign language interpreter Wong Yiu-pong previously translated *Glory to Hong Kong* into sign language and acted as an interpreter at civic press conferences during the 2019 protests.⁶⁹ After local organisers cancelled his theatre performance in 2023—and multiple attempts to find another venue failed—he ultimately staged his show in Taipei, illustrating how practitioners feel compelled to look abroad for platforms.
100. While these examples of adaptation showcase the sector’s resilience, they also highlight the significant costs to artistic freedom and the diversity of cultural expression in Hong Kong. The need to reformat, reimagine creative works, or find alternate venues often compromises artistic vision, reduces audience engagement and imposes financial and emotional burdens on cultural workers who must navigate an increasingly uncertain environment.

Tightening Control in Education and Schools

101. The education sector in Hong Kong has undergone systematic reforms that have reshaped both institutional practices and educational content. We have observed tightened control over the years through disciplinary measures against teachers, comprehensive curriculum reforms, and enhanced school evaluation mechanisms, eroding academic freedom and violating the right to education.

Threatening Academic Freedom through Deregistration or Disciplinary Action Against Teachers

102. Teachers in Hong Kong who participate in political activities, express dissenting views online or include “sensitive” materials in their curricula risk facing disciplinary action from the Education Bureau. Cases of teacher deregistration increased from none in 2018 to 71 in 2024. Six of the 21 deregistration cases documented in 2022 were linked to complaints regarding the 2019 extradition bill protests.⁷⁰ Oversight of these developments has become increasingly challenging since the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union disbanded in 2021 under intensified pressure on pro-democracy groups. Nevertheless, the

Education Bureau confirmed four new disciplinary actions in 2024 related to the 2019 protests, reinforcing a tangible sense of an ongoing “witch hunt.”⁷¹

103. A landmark judicial review decided in 2024 represented the first legal challenge to this heightened scrutiny.⁷² The case involved a teacher with 25 years of service who was dismissed in 2023, forfeiting her retirement benefits after posting critical remarks about the police on her private Facebook page in 2019. The disciplinary hearing determined that she had “failed to meet the expected standards of a teacher” and allegedly harmed the Government’s reputation. Although the court did not uphold her freedom of expression, it found her dismissal excessively harsh. This outcome underscores the precarious position of educators who express pro-democracy sentiments. Beyond the classroom, teachers confront an uncertain environment where personal speech may jeopardise both their careers and financial security.
104. Notably, shortly after the teacher posted her comments in 2019, 110 complaints were filed against her with the Education Bureau and relevant authorities, while the school itself received 109 emails and 138 telephone calls from the public. Similar complaint campaigns have also targeted other teachers and professionals like lawyers, underscoring the risks faced by individuals who speak out on politically sensitive issues.

Curtailling Institutional Autonomy in Higher Education

105. Recent changes to university governance structures reflect a broader erosion of institutional autonomy in Hong Kong’s higher education sector. Efforts to reduce student representation and centralise control have been evident in reforms to the councils of Lingnan University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2023.⁷³ In 2024, a bill was introduced to amend the governing ordinance of the City University of Hong Kong, aiming to remove the automatic seat held by student union leaders on the university council. During the Legislative Council’s discussion of the bill, lawmakers argued that any student representative should demonstrate patriotism toward China and Hong Kong.⁷⁴ These developments reflect a growing trend of political interference and heightened government control over university governance.

Curriculum Reform and Ideological Control

106. The Government established the Working Group on Patriotic Education in April in line with the Patriotic Education Law of the People’s Republic of China passed in the previous year. This demonstrates a commitment to advancing ideological education. Published work by the Working Group in 2024 included the production of a song with a music video aimed at subtly fostering national awareness and enhancing patriotic feelings among listeners.⁷⁵ It recommended schools play the

song in music halls and during choir practice, adding that people should sing it together for China's National Day on October 1, to dedicate it to the country.

107. Regarding curriculum reform, the Education Bureau has systematically restructured teaching content, evidenced by the introduction of the new Citizenship, Economics, and Society subject in junior secondary schools in September 2024.⁷⁶ The 126-page curriculum guide incorporates patriotic education and "Xi Jinping Thought" into the Form Three syllabus and prescribes specific teaching activities to reinforce these elements, including student speeches during flag-raising ceremonies and inter-class competitions on national development achievements.⁷⁷ The standardisation of this ideological education is further reinforced through the distribution of a book of Xi Jinping's discourses on Chinese modernisation to school principals across Hong Kong, followed by a sharing session led by the education minister to reflect on the text.⁷⁸
108. School evaluation mechanisms have expanded to include new areas of scrutiny. External school reviews now assess aspects such as students' national anthem performances, with reports highlighting weak singing voices and recommending corrective measures. Schools face evaluation regarding their implementation of national education calendars. Some were criticised for a lack of understanding of national security education requirements⁷⁹.

International Standards and Academic Freedom

109. These developments contradict international human rights standards, particularly Article 13 of the ICESCR, which protects the right to education. In its General Comment No. 13, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights emphasises that academic freedom safeguards individuals' right to express views about their institutions without fear of repression and to enjoy the same fundamental rights as others in their jurisdiction.⁸⁰ At the same time, it underscores the obligations inherent in academic freedom, including respecting others' freedom to hold differing opinions and avoiding discrimination on any prohibited grounds. The Committee's 2023 Concluding Observations on Hong Kong specifically expressed concern regarding pressure on staff and students in higher education institutions, content censorship, and the undermining of academic freedom.⁸¹
110. The cumulative effect of these measures—including stricter teacher oversight, politicised curriculum reforms, and intensified evaluation mechanisms—has created a comprehensive system of control that severely undermines educational autonomy and academic freedom in Hong Kong's schools and universities. These developments will have the greatest impact on younger and future generations, shaping how they learn, think, and engage with society under increasingly constrained conditions.

Conclusion

111. This second annual human rights assessment for 2024 reveals a deeply concerning trajectory for Hong Kong. Our investigation demonstrates that the recent expansion of the national security regime, particularly through the SNSO, has been accompanied by increasingly repressive measures. Beyond the well-documented criticisms made by human rights experts regarding the SNSO's ambiguous provisions, our analysis delves into how these laws have been used to target ordinary citizens and suppress online dissent through sedition charges, all while the Government's surveillance capacity continues to escalate.
112. The rule of law has long served as a vital safeguard for human rights; however, the SNSO's grant of sweeping executive powers effectively enables the state to override judicial independence. This erosion does not only impact high-profile political cases, but also everyday legal disputes and business operations. There are increased restrictions on lawyers, barriers to legal aid and funding for judicial review, and efforts to create a climate of fear surrounding legal challenges. Even when judges uphold rights against the Government, there is a concerning pattern of the Government sidestepping court rulings. In political cases, executive decisions can override judicial decisions, which may affect businesses such as Google and YouTube in the *Glory to Hong Kong* case. This situation undermines public trust and jeopardises the integrity of the legal system.
113. In 2024, the Government actively promoted its narrative that human rights are protected, claiming it had not rejected any applications for public assembly and that press freedom remained intact. In reality, however, a range of indirect suppression tactics—such as selective tax audits, the weaponisation of minor regulatory infractions, and the targeted cancellation of cultural events—have effectively silenced protest and dissent to a larger extent. Additionally, pervasive censorship in the cultural and educational spheres, including stringent curriculum reforms and the systematic removal of politically sensitive materials, further restricts public discourse and stifles the intellectual vibrancy of the city.
114. Looking forward, we are deeply concerned about the proliferation of physical and digital surveillance technologies, including the growing use of artificial intelligence and facial recognition when protections for privacy and rights are severely lacking. These measures, ostensibly justified as essential for maintaining public order, are being used to suppress dissent and stifle political expression. Censorship of publications, curriculum reforms emphasising patriotic education, and restrictions on academic freedom will profoundly impact the younger generation.

115. Despite these formidable challenges, the Hong Kong people's resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness remain evident. Their capacity for adaptation—whether through shifting cultural events online or seeking platforms abroad—underscores a steadfast commitment to freedom of expression and civic engagement. However, the stakes are high. Without urgent, coordinated action from domestic actors, foreign governments, international organisations, businesses, and civil society, the erosion of judicial independence and civil liberties in Hong Kong may soon become irreversible, with consequences far beyond its borders.

Recommendations

1. Acknowledge the Erosion of the Rule of Law

Recognise the substantial decline in judicial independence in Hong Kong and its broader implications beyond overtly political cases. Avoid treating court decisions—such as injunctions and warrants—as inherently impartial. Instead, independent legal experts should be consulted to assess potential lawfare strategies and incorporate such assessments into diplomatic and business risk analyses.

2. Identify and Address Subtle Forms of Lawfare

Acknowledge that routine administrative measures—such as licensing enforcement, venue restrictions, or regulatory audits—may be used as tools of repression against civil society and peaceful dissent. Support efforts to document and publicise these tactics to strengthen international awareness and enhance early warning and protection mechanisms.

3. Safeguard Internet Freedom, Digital Security, and Access to Essential Online Services

Promote and protect open, secure, and uncensored digital environments. Ensure that individuals, including activists, journalists, and civil society actors, can access essential digital services—such as cloud storage, banking platforms, and web hosting—without fear of surveillance, censorship, or reprisal. Support initiatives that provide digital security training, strengthen data protection laws, and develop secure communication infrastructure to counter unlawful surveillance and digital repression.

Recommendations to Policymakers

4. Address Transnational Repression

Enact or amend legislation to effectively combat transnational repression in both its physical and digital forms. Establish an enforceable reporting mechanism to receive and investigate complaints, ensure timely follow-up, and provide appropriate remedies for victims. Strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to identify and respond to such acts through specialised training and inter-agency coordination. Extend training and guidance to public institutions—including schools—and private sector actors to ensure a whole-of-society approach to preventing and mitigating transnational repression.

5. Implement Human Rights Due Diligence

Adopt a rights-based foreign policy by imposing targeted export controls on lethal and less-lethal weapons, crowd control equipment, protective gear, digital forensic tools, surveillance technologies, and associated training services destined for Hong Kong law enforcement agencies. These controls should remain in place until verifiable human rights reforms are implemented. Mandate robust human rights due diligence and impact assessments for companies operating in high-risk sectors to prevent complicity in international human rights standards violations.

6. Promote Judicial Independence & Access to Justice

Support international monitoring of politically sensitive trials in Hong Kong and promote independent expert reviews of prosecutorial and judicial practices grounded in common law principles, international human rights standards, and rule of law norms. Advocate for greater transparency through informed public commentary on court decisions and call for comprehensive legal and institutional reforms to safeguard fair trial rights and restore judicial independence.

7. Empower companies' resistance to lawfare by Hong Kong Government

Establish dedicated support mechanisms—such as legal advisory networks, rapid-response legal aid, or defence funds—for companies facing coercive legal demands or enforcement actions from Hong Kong authorities that infringe on human rights. Recent cases involving foreign web-hosting providers (e.g., Wix, WordPress) and digital platforms (e.g., UK-based Emubands Ltd.) highlight how companies are being drawn into compliance with repressive laws, impacting freedom of expression and access to information. Clear legal guidance and financial support will empower companies to resist undue pressure and contribute to a broader defence of digital rights and civil liberties in Hong Kong.

8. Enhance Support for Hong Kong Civil Society

Provide sustained political, financial, and practical support to Hong Kong civil society organisations, including those operating on the ground under increasing risk, as well as activists, civic groups, and human rights defenders in exile or in diaspora communities. Expand funding mechanisms, emergency assistance, and legal protection frameworks to strengthen their resilience. Facilitate secure cross-border collaboration, capacity-building initiatives, and access to international advocacy platforms to ensure that civil society can continue its essential work despite growing repression.

9. Urge Compliance with International Mechanisms

Urge Hong Kong and China to ratify outstanding human rights instruments—such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT)—and fulfil

overdue reporting obligations to UN treaty bodies. Raise concerns about compliance and cooperation during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and other UN human rights mechanisms to ensure sustained international scrutiny.

10. Establish Safe Pathways for Hong Kongers at Risk

Facilitate the relocation of Hongkongers who wish to leave Hong Kong; implement dedicated humanitarian visa schemes or special pathways for individuals fleeing political persecution in Hong Kong. These pathways should provide clear legal status, access to resettlement support, and protection against refoulement.

11. Support Independent Media

Promote transnational media partnerships that enable investigative journalism free from local censorship. Provide digital security training, emergency support, and secure infrastructure to protect journalists and independent media outlets reporting on sensitive issues related to Hong Kong.

Recommendations to the UN

12. Strengthen Monitoring & Reporting

Encourage relevant UN Special Rapporteurs to request country visits to Hong Kong and ensure sustained attention to the situation through periodic reports and thematic updates by Special Procedures. Expand documentation of digital repression, surveillance, and lawfare tactics used to suppress dissent and restrict fundamental freedoms.

13. Ensure Protection from Reprisals

Establish clear and accessible protocols to protect individuals and organisations engaging with UN mechanisms, including confidential channels for reporting intimidation, harassment, or threats. Issue timely and public statements in response to credible allegations of reprisals and coordinate with relevant actors to facilitate safe relocation or protective measures where necessary.

14. Promote Treaty Ratification and Compliance

Urge the People's Republic of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to ratify outstanding core human rights treaties and adopt optional protocols that strengthen civil and political rights protection. Highlight patterns of non-compliance during Universal Periodic Review (UPR) sessions, treaty body reviews, and other multilateral forums to maintain consistent international pressure.

15. Support Implementation of UN Human Rights Mechanisms'

Recommendations

Urge the Hong Kong Government to fully implement the recommendations issued by UN treaty bodies, Special Procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). These include key concerns such as the protection of academic freedom, the independence of the judiciary, safeguards against arbitrary detention, freedom of expression and assembly, and the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment.

16. Follow up on Past Recommendations by UN Human Rights Mechanisms

Encourage UN human rights mechanisms to follow up on past recommendations systematically, request information on implementation, and ensure that these issues remain central in future reviews. Where non-compliance persists, coordinate public communications, high-level engagement, and technical assistance offers to press for concrete and measurable reforms.

Recommendations to Businesses & Financial Institutions

17. Conduct Rigorous Human Rights Due Diligence

Implement robust human rights due diligence processes across operations and supply chains to identify and address actual or potential involvement in human rights abuses. Publish transparent impact assessments. Take immediate steps to suspend or reconsider investment, procurement, or business relationships with entities linked to serious rights violations unless verifiable and meaningful reforms are undertaken.

18. Adopt Clear Policies to Resist Authoritarian Lawfare

Develop and enforce internal policies to safeguard against compliance with coercive data requests, politically motivated legal orders, or extraterritorial enforcement of repressive laws from Hong Kong. Engage with civil society organisations and international human rights institutions to strengthen accountability mechanisms, enhance transparency, and promote corporate responsibility in high-risk environments.

Recommendations to Hong Kong and Chinese Governments

19. Repeal the National Security Law and Safeguarding National Security Ordinance

Immediately repeal the National Security Law (NSL) and the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO), which are incompatible with international human rights standards and have enabled widespread repression of fundamental freedoms.

20. Immediately and Unconditionally Release Political Prisoners

Release all individuals detained or imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association.

21. End Interference with Judicial Independence

End all forms of executive interference with judicial independence, including the designation of national security judges, the issuance of certificates and directives that override court decisions and procedures. Reinstate procedural safeguards to ensure fair trials.

22. End All Forms of Transnational Repression

Cease cross-border harassment, surveillance, and intimidation of activists, journalists, and diaspora communities. Conduct prompt and impartial investigations into reported incidents and hold those responsible to account in accordance with international law.

23. Ensure Accountability for Human Rights Violations

Initiate credible, independent, and transparent investigations into allegations of torture, ill-treatment, and excessive use of force by law enforcement. Establish an independent police oversight mechanism in line with recommendations from UN treaty bodies.

24. Uphold Judicial Independence

End executive interference in national security cases and ensure judicial decisions are free from political pressure. Repeal or amend overly broad provisions under the NSL and SNSO that compromise the impartiality and independence of the judiciary.

25. Protect Freedoms of Expression, Assembly, and Association

Lift unjustified restrictions on peaceful protests and public gatherings. Revoke policies and practices that impose broad censorship in the arts, media, education and online spaces, and guarantee space for critical expression and civic participation.

26. Facilitate Access to Justice

Reform legal aid policies to ensure equitable access to justice and encourage legitimate human rights litigation. Prohibit the use of punitive cost orders to deter public interest legal challenges and safeguard the role of the courts in upholding constitutional rights.

References

Disclaimer. Some sources referenced in this report are in Traditional Chinese. English translations of their titles are provided for reference and do not represent official translations.

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