

RIISING TIDE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON RETURN OF PROTESTS IN HONG KONG

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Protests and violence [returned to Hong Kong](#) on May 24. In scenes that became all-too-familiar through much of last year, police used water cannons, tear gas, and pepper spray, as a protest march descended into clashes between protesters and riot police. The weekend's march had originally been planned ahead of a debate in Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) on a new national anthem bill, which would punish anyone who insulted China's anthem with up to three years in prison. The protest assumed significance when two days before the march, China's central government stunned Hong Kong's pro-democracy parties by tabling a new [national security bill](#), as the National People's Congress met in Beijing. The bill, expected to be passed when the NPC's annual session ends on Thursday, urges Hong Kong's legislature to pass national security laws "as soon as possible". Else, the bill leaves open the possibility that Beijing could bypass LegCo, declaring that the NPC is "authorized to draft laws" on security for Hong Kong. What has concerned pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong is a new provision for China's national security organs to "set up institutions" in the Special Administrative Region.

Under the Basic Law that has governed Hong Kong since 1997, the SAR has a high degree of autonomy "to enjoy executive, legislative and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication"; only defence and foreign affairs are to be handled by Beijing. Article 23 of the law requires Hong Kong to pass national security legislation, but the law makes clear it is Hong Kong's legislature that enjoys the power to make and repeal laws — the bedrock of the "one country, two systems" model. In 2003, a national security bill allowing the shutting down of seditious newspapers and carrying out warrantless searches was withdrawn after protests. Beijing now argues that last year's protests, blamed on "external forces", underlined the need for a new law to curb "acts of secession and subversion". The timing of the move may reveal its motivations. Hong Kong's legislative elections are in September and the pro-Beijing camp fears losing control of LegCo, even if its unusual rules have stacked it with pro-Beijing lawmakers. Only half of the 70 seats are directly elected; the rest are nominated. Yet such is the rising tide of support for pro-democracy parties that Beijing worries it could lose the two-thirds majority needed for any amendments to the Basic Law. The pro-democracy camp swept November's district council elections, seen as a referendum on the youth-driven protests. A record 70% turnout won the pro-democracy candidates 390 of 452 seats. The elections demonstrated that public support for full democracy is growing. The new piece of legislation is aimed at tightening Beijing's grip over Hong Kong, but it may well end up having the opposite effect. Hong Kong cannot be won without its people.

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