

Shouting matches, scuffles as 11 Hong Kong opposition members thrown out of key committee meeting in legislature

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Pro-establishment camp regains control of House Committee but rivals vow to hold own session and elect new chair.

Opposition threatens action against Legco staff, accusing them of aiding Starry Lee, as she clears 14 bills with allies, but not controversial national anthem legislation.

VIDEO <https://youtu.be/hvtiwh8YvoE>

A meeting in Hong Kong's legislature descended into shouting matches and scuffles as 11 opposition lawmakers were thrown out by a pro-establishment leader who took control of a key committee to begin clearing a backlog of bills for review.

The pan-democrats walked out of talks on Friday after losing their hold over the House Committee, threatening court action against Legislative Council staff, including legal advisers and security guards, whom they accused of abandoning political neutrality and succumbing to pressure from Beijing.

"Only with the collusion of the secretariat can the pro-establishment camp seize power to hold an illegitimate meeting and evict lawmakers unlawfully," said the Civic Party's Dennis Kwok, who presided over the previous 17 meetings as vice-chairman.

The pro-establishment bloc's control of the chairmanship of the panel did not mean that the seven-month gridlock in the committee had been resolved, as Kwok's camp vowed to continue hosting "legitimate" meetings to elect a chair. They argued that this should be the first order of business.

Friday's discussion ended at 6pm, after Starry Lee Wai-king - the incumbent House Committee chairwoman standing for a re-election - and her allies cleared 14 bills, setting up committees to scrutinise some of them. The camp moved a step closer to passing the controversial national anthem bill, which was not yet on the agenda and would define how people must behave when March of the Volunteers is played.

The face-off came after Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor and Beijing urged lawmakers to break the deadlock and move on to processing legislation, including the anthem bill.

Beijing's agencies overseeing local affairs have also repeatedly accused Kwok of misconduct for allowing his fellow pan-democrats to filibuster in meetings in the committee, which is responsible for scrutinising bills before sending them for a final vote.

Their strongly worded criticism over matters of the local legislature, along with remarks that two of the central government's offices were not bound by Article 22 of the Basic Law - which guarantees non-interference from mainland departments - raised concerns Beijing was further tightening its grip on Hong Kong.

The crux of the conflict was whether talks should be led by Lee or Kwok, the vice-chairman, who has presided over meetings.

The drama on Friday began when Lee dashed for the podium immediately after the end of an education panel meeting at 1.15pm, beating any opposition member to it.

Her pro-government allies surrounded her, while security guards prevented pan-democrats from getting close.

A shouting match ensued, with pan-democrats chanting: "Starry Lee step down." Their rivals yelled that Kwok was abusing his power, and held placards saying he should be kicked out of the legislature.

As the 2.30pm meeting started, amid pushing and jostling, Lee started to speak but her voice was mostly drowned out. She cited external legal advice sought by Legco president Andrew Leung Kwan-yuen, that she had the power to handle urgent matters, saying she hoped to reach a consensus over who should preside.

Despite warnings by Lee that anyone obstructing the meeting could be in breach of the law, the pan-democrats tried repeatedly to storm the chairperson's seat, with Eddie Chu Hoi-dick at one point climbing the wall behind the podium to get close to Lee.

Lee said to her opponents: "You can challenge my authority, but you cannot stop the meeting from proceeding. I don't want legislators violating the law."

She eventually evicted 11 pan-democrats in total. The lawmakers were each carried away by three to four Legco staff members. As they stood and waited to be removed, most chanted: "Starry Lee, acting beyond her authority!"

Andrew Wan Siu-kin, who was among those expelled, injured his back and was taken to hospital in an ambulance. Raymond Chan Chi-chuen, also from the opposition, was dragged on the ground by the rival camp's Kwok Wai-keung for several metres until Kwok was stopped by a colleague.

Dennis Kwok said he had ordered Lee to leave her seat half an hour after the meeting started, but voiced regret that security guards failed to execute the order. He snapped at Lee: "You think you are holding a meeting now? You haven't learned any lessons from last year's meetings over the extradition bill."

He was referring to physical clashes and mayhem between the two camps over the now-withdrawn bill, which triggered months of often-violent unrest.

As Kwok ordered his evicted colleagues to re-enter the meeting room, the pan-democrats tried to storm in, but security guards locked the doors. Chu then shouted: "Let us in! Otherwise you've committed an offence of obstructing lawmakers in performing our duties."

Legco's legal adviser Connie Fung Sau-kuen backed Lee, saying she had the responsibility to resolve "new problems" from the paralysed meeting. Fung denied that this view contradicted earlier advice from her in October.

"The original advice in October was about the normal situation ... But the repeated stalling of the chair election brought in new problems which we cannot regard as a normal situation."

Decrying Fung's justifications, all members of the opposition, except Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, walked out of the meeting. Alone, Cheung chanted, "Starry Lee, you acted beyond your authority", in a monotone for almost an hour - all while Lee was dealing with matters on bills with her allies, resulting in her eventually heeding their call to eject him.

Some members of the pro-establishment camp urged Lee to present the national anthem bill along with other proposals to the full council for a vote as soon as possible.

While the pan-democrats have vowed to run their own meeting to elect a new chair, the pro-Beijing camp's Paul Tse Wai-chun called Friday's events a breakthrough in dealing with the House Committee backlog, adding this was also likely to speed up the stalled chair election.

"Previously all lanes were blocked ... Now they will have less incentive to prolong the election," Tse said, adding that Lee could continue to chair parallel sessions on essential businesses.

The clash followed a morning session of the committee, which ended in the opposition vowing to stymie their rivals' agenda for the afternoon, insisting that a new chairman must be installed before the handling of other matters.

Kwok ended the 45-minute session by ruling that the election should remain the committee's "first order of business", despite protests from Lee's allies.

Citing advice from constitutional law experts Philip Dykes and Johannes Chan Man-mun, Kwok and his camp said Lee could have a conflict of interest in chairing the meeting while standing for re-election.

Former Legco president Andrew Wong Wang-fat, an expert on the body's rules of procedures, renewed his call for the current head of the legislature Andrew Leung to bring the matter to the full council and reach a resolution.

"We are all trapped in this dilemma and yearn for a solution, but now all sides are playing politics," he said.

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