

Tiananmen vigil in Hong Kong draws thousands despite coronavirus-related ban

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Police stand back as crowds pour into Victoria Park in Causeway Bay and take up a couple of soccer pitches.

Show of defiance comes on a politically charged day as legislature passes a law criminalising disrespect for national anthem.

See VDEO : <https://youtu.be/aEfDyz7Uf0c>

Thousands flooded Hong Kong's Victoria Park on Thursday 4 night for the annual candlelight vigil to mark the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, defying a ban on the mass gathering imposed by the police for the first time on health protection grounds.

The show of defiance came on a politically charged day as the legislature passed a law criminalising disrespect for the national anthem, amid a raging controversy over China's top legislative body tailor-making a national security law for the city.

Police, who had warned they had thousands of riot officers ready and would enforce anti-coronavirus rules limiting groups to a maximum of eight people each, stood back as the crowds poured into the park in Causeway Bay and took up a couple of soccer pitches.

The peace was broken only in Mong Kok when protesters blocked Argyle Street and plain-clothes police officers used pepper spray and batons to stop them. Sources said at least four people were arrested.

At Victoria Park, social-distancing rules were set aside as participants lit candles and torches in remembrance of the victims of the June 4 crackdown on China's pro-democracy protests, and shouted slogans challenging Beijing's authority.

"End one-party rule!" and "Rectify the verdict on 1989 movement!" they chanted, drowning out police warnings that they were taking part in an unauthorised assembly as they poured into the park.

They also ignored messages broadcast over loudspeakers that they could be spreading Covid-19. *"Oppose national security law!"* was another slogan that could be heard, along with *"Free Hong Kong, revolution of our times!"* and *"Hong Kong independence!"*

The participants held up candles and lights as the vigil began at 8pm, and observed a minute's silence at 8.09pm to mourn those who died 31 years ago.

Asked whether the organiser of the vigil would face arrest for the illegal gathering, a source said police would pursue the matter subject to the strength of evidence.

"The force banned the vigil on health grounds amid the Covid-19 pandemic, but we also understand that the June 4 commemoration is a symbolic and historical event, and it has been peaceful in the past," another source said. *"As long as it does not pose any threats to public safety and order, we will not need to send officers to handle it."*

A police spokesman said officers had taken enforcement action using minimal force only to prevent the road blockade in Mong Kok.

In various parts of Tai Wai, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, people were also seen waving flags or banners advocating Hong Kong independence, while shouting anti-government slogans. Titled *"Candlelight in Every Corner of Hong Kong"* by the organisers, this year's commemoration was also driven by concerns about the city's autonomy with the impending new law that would ban *"acts and activities"* deemed as endangering national security.

It was also the first time in 30 years that the Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China had been barred by the authorities from holding the annual event in Victoria Park.

Alliance chairman Lee Cheuk-yan said the ban amounted to political suppression.

"The people and students of China rose to fight for freedom and democracy. The Chinese Communist Party, in defending its dictatorship, answered with bloodshed," he said in a speech at the 45-minute event.

Rejecting the government's assurances that the new national security law would not affect existing freedoms, he said: *"This marks the end of 'one country, two systems' and the freedoms Hongkongers are entitled to enjoy."*

Households across the city were also encouraged to light candles if they could not attend the vigil.

Earlier, at a street booth set up by organisers in Wong Tai Sin, Marco Yip, 14, picked up a candle and planned to light it alone in a public area.

Yip said he wanted to join activities to remember the crackdown more after the anti-government protests last year and the arrival of the new law.

"Maybe [Beijing] will suppress rallies and classify events like the June 4 vigil as inciting subversion of state power," he said.

In Mong Kok, graduate Brenda Hui, 24, chose to join a smaller vigil with a friend, Jasmine He. They had marked an umbrella with the slogan, *"never forget June 4"*.

"I hope to merge the idea of the 'umbrella movement', a symbol of protest in Hong Kong in our era, with the message of 'never forget'," Hui said.

Among the crowd at Victoria Park was **Han Dongfang**, a labour-rights activist who was on Beijing's most-wanted list after the 1989 crackdown.

"Victoria Park is an important place. When there is a public gathering, I have to come," said Han, who was jailed for 22 months and released in 1991 for tuberculosis treatment in the US. He was caught again in 1993 on his return to Guangzhou and then expelled to Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has been the only place on Chinese soil to hold a large-scale public gathering every year to mark the Tiananmen crackdown.

But some now fear the iconic sea of lit candles, seen by the world every year on June 4, might not happen again next year, with Beijing's tightening grip over the city.

Lee Cheuk-yan said as long as people refused to give up or forget, the annual commemoration would live on.

"The most important is not the park, but the candlelight, and our determination. So long as we refuse to forget, there will be commemoration, no matter where we happen to be," he said.

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3087623/tiananmen-vigil-hong-kong-draws-thousands-despite>