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Rights and freedom

'My time in the UK has been a disaster': Hongkongers fear deportation after years left in limbo

Friday 19 May 2023, by [HAWKINS Amy](#), [JAMES James](#) (Date first published: 12 May 2023).

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In March 2021, less than one month after his 18th birthday, Lawson* made a decision that would change the course of his life for ever.

The previous year had been tumultuous in Hong Kong. Lawson, like millions of other Hongkongers, had taken to the streets to participate in [pro-democracy protests](#) against the influence of the Chinese Communist party, which was seeking to tighten its grip on the territory.

He had been forced by police to kneel on the ground as he choked on teargas at the [siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in November 2019](#), where he said he was also arrested for rioting before being released without charge.

Beijing declared victory over Lawson and the protesters with the imposition of a [draconian national security law in June 2020](#). When that law was passed, the government promised that it would not be applied retroactively. But by January 2021, the police had arrested dozens of pro-democracy activists, protesters, teachers and scholars, who became known as the [Hong Kong 47](#) and were preparing to charge them with conspiracy to commit subversion, an offence that carries a maximum of a life sentence.

People hold a banner in a human chain in London, to protest against political oppression in Hong Kong, January 2022. Photograph: May James

Lawson saw the writing on the wall, and a friend bought him a plane ticket to London. But his trauma continues. He is now one of the growing number of Hongkongers left in limbo in the UK, fearing deportation back to the persecution from which they escaped, after claiming asylum in a system where the [average wait for a decision is more than a year](#).

As of December 2022, there were 160 Hongkongers in the UK awaiting decisions on their asylum applications, more than double the number in December 2020. And 13 Hongkongers were either deported or left the UK voluntarily after being rejected for asylum in 2020 and 2021.

In early 2021, as the Hong Kong authorities were closing in on anyone who dared criticise them, their counterparts in the UK were preparing to offer those critics a way out. Dominic Raab, then the UK's foreign secretary, said the national security law breached international law, and that the UK was [opening its doors to those who wanted to flee](#). "We have been clear we won't look the other way when it comes to Hong Kong. We will live up to our historic responsibility to its people," he said.

The UK offer was this: anyone with British national (overseas) (BNO) status, and their dependents, could come to live, study and work in the UK. Within a year of the scheme being launched, there were more than 100,000 applications. By December 2022, 105,200 had arrived, one of the biggest waves of non-EU migration to the UK in postwar history.

An asylum seeker sits in the garden of a Hongkonger-hosted safe house in London, October 2021. Photograph: May James

Lawson, along with more than 100 other Hongkongers now fearing deportation from the UK, was not among that historic cohort. The BNO immigration route was open to anyone born before 1 July 1997, when [Hong Kong](#) was handed over from British to Chinese rule, who had registered for BNO status, along with their partner or spouse and eligible dependents. That excluded many young people such as Lawson, who were often at the frontlines of the protests, unless they came with a BNO parent (the scheme was expanded in November 2022).

Lawson's parents had not applied for BNO status, so he joined a smaller and more vulnerable group - he became an asylum seeker. "I just wanted to stay [in the UK] and escape the persecution from the Hong Kong and China government," he says. But two years later, living in asylum-seekers' [hotel accommodation](#), he says that his time in the UK has been "a disaster" as he continues to be left in limbo, not knowing whether he will be deported or granted asylum.

Although many exiled Hongkongers see themselves as political refugees, very few choose to claim asylum. It is a last resort behind the BNO route, or getting a job or student visa. Between 2020 and 2022, there were 184,916 asylum applications to the UK, of which only 259 came from Hongkongers.

An asylum seeker holds a Hong Kong independence flag in London, February 2021. 'I was arrested on 31 August 2019, after clashes between train commuters and pro-democracy demonstrators. I thought I was going to die from the pressure police were putting on my back.' Photograph: May James

Those who choose to come to the UK asking for asylum usually do so because they have no alternative, or no idea what they are getting themselves into.

When Ivan Yim arrived in London in November 2020, aged 18, he didn't know where he would sleep that night. Unable to answer basic questions about his travel plans, he was denied entry to the UK. But he couldn't face returning to Hong Kong, where he feared being arrested and [tortured](#), as he says he was in 2019. So he claimed asylum. After waiting for 15 hours in an airport detention centre, he was picked up by Hongkongers who had been notified of his presence through a network of contacts.

Although the BNO scheme is "unusual in how liberal it is", it can still be "prohibitively expensive" for some, says Peter Walsh, a senior researcher at the Migration Observatory, based at the University of Oxford. A single applicant must have at least £5,370 to cover the application fee, the NHS healthcare surcharge and the minimum savings threshold.

Asylum seekers in a safe house in Manchester. While many find welcome in safe houses others report being exploited by their hosts. Photograph: May James

Since Hongkongers started arriving in such large numbers in 2020, community groups have sprung into action to help people resettle in the UK. Many asylum seekers (and BNOs with no immediate accommodation options) end up in “safe houses” provided by fellow Hongkongers, or are housed with volunteer host families. These arrangements can be a more welcoming alternative to government-sponsored asylum accommodation. But the relationship between the asylum seekers and the hosts can also be tense, and ripe for exploitation.

Several asylum seekers interviewed by the Guardian say they were forced to cook and clean at community centres or safe houses in return for free accommodation. But more troubling for many is what one describes as the “emotional blackmail” of certain hosts, who shout at or even physically abuse their charges.

Although Ivan felt unsafe, it was hard for him to leave the safe house, as he says his movements were monitored closely, and he was warned that he might be kidnapped by agents of the Chinese government if he struck out alone. But in early 2021 he fled, and on 1 February moved into government-sponsored accommodation for asylum seekers in a hotel in east London, where he spent the next 26 months. He moved out in April, after being granted asylum in December.

Lawson continues to wait in a hotel for asylum seekers for his fate to be decided. He moved there in September 2021, after bouncing between various safe houses in England and Wales, where he describes being exploited and in one case physically assaulted after an argument with his hosts, who warned him that he would end up in a refugee camp if he disobeyed them.

Ivan, aged 18 when he claimed asylum, spent 26 months living in government-sponsored hotel accommodation before finally being granted asylum. Photograph: May James

Instead, he ended up in hospital, before seeking refuge in his current accommodation. The hotel is “comfortable”, he says, apart from the fact that hotel staff have entered his room without warning on several occasions, which “triggers my mental illness”. For asylum seekers who are fearful of the overseas reach of the Chinese Communist party, these kinds of intrusions can be particularly traumatic. For Ivan it provoked a breakdown.

Since the start of the BNO scheme, the refusal rate for applicants has started to creep up, from 0.5% in the first quarter of 2021 to 3% by the end of 2022. It is too soon to say whether those rejections will become asylum applications. But if they do, those new asylum seekers can expect to wait more than six months for a decision, with a refusal rate for Hongkongers of about 15%.

Asylum seekers from Hong Kong can find it hard to provide evidence that they fear political persecution, such as pictures of them at protests, because they have often deliberately left no trace of themselves online, says Lucas Yue, an outreach officer at Project Haven, run by Hongkongers in Britain to help non-BNO Hongkongers. The BNO scheme is a “more stable, predictable and faster way to escape” from Hong Kong, he says.

‘The entire system [for refugees] is far too unsafe’: Ivan, who was granted asylum in April. Photograph: May James

[Nathan Law](#), an exiled activist who was [granted asylum in the UK in 2021](#), said that the experience of BNOs and asylum seekers was “drastically different” and that the “maltreatment of these asylum seekers should be exposed and tackled”.

A [Home Office](#) spokesperson said: “The unprecedented Hong Kong BN(O) visa route reflects the UK’s historic and moral commitment to those people of Hong Kong who chose to retain their ties to the UK by taking up British national (overseas) status at the point of Hong Kong’s handover to China

in 1997.

“The route is a British success story with more than 153,700 visas granted by the end of December 2022. In November 2022, we expanded the route to allow young Hongkongers born since 1 July 1997 and with at least one parent with British national (overseas) status to apply independently of their parents.”

Tens of thousands of Hongkongers have found a haven in the UK thanks to the BNO scheme. But for refugees like Lawson and Ivan, it is a different story. “I came here to seek safety,” says Ivan. “But, not only for Hong Kong people, the entire system [for refugees] is far too unsafe.”

Amy Hawkins and *May James*

* *Full name not given for privacy reasons*

P.S.

- The Guardian. Fri 12 May 2023 06.00 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/12/my-time-in-uk-has-been-disaster-hongkongers-fear-deportation-after-years-left-in-limbo>

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