

What next for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement?

Tuesday 4 June 2024, by [YANG William](#) (Date first published: 31 May 2024).

What do the subversion verdicts handed down to 14 pro-democracy activists by Hong Kong's High Court mean for life in the territory? DW spoke with experts.

The [guilty verdicts handed down to 14 pro-democracy activists](#) in [Hong Kong](#) by the city's High Court on Thursday is an outcome that many had been expecting for more than three years.

"The outcome shows that the government sees what many Hong Kongers do these days as conspiring, something bigger, or being influenced by foreign forces," said a former district councilor who refused to be named due to security concerns.

In her view, this chilling effect has been spread across Hong Kong's civil society and pushes most people to keep a distance from participating in civic activities.

"This atmosphere is forcing many Hong Kongers to keep a distance from caring about public issues," she told DW.

Biggest trial against pro-democracy activists

Some 47 activists were charged in 2021 with "conspiracy to commit subversion" under a [controversial national security law](#) that [China](#) imposed on the former British colony in July 2020 in an effort to eliminate dissent. The charges were brought for organizing an unofficial primary that same year.

Most of the defendants have been in detention since then, 31 of whom had pleaded guilty prior to Thursday's court proceedings. The remaining 16 had maintained their innocence throughout the trial.

The outcome of the biggest trial against pro-democracy campaigners since the [imposition of the national security law](#) reflects the extent of authorities' crackdown on Hong Kong's opposition forces.

Critics: Pro-democracy activists got a political trial

The subversion charges imposed against the pro-democracy activists are simply the government's "brazen effort" to imprison all of the democratic opposition, according to Samuel Bickett, an American human rights lawyer who was jailed in Hong Kong for four months after he confronted an off-duty police officer during the 2019 anti-government protests in the city.

"The whole democratic opposition was imprisoned for nothing except participating in democracy and I think it shows that all the other national security cases in the future will also result in convictions and heavy sentences," Bickett told DW.

While critics say the case — which has dragged on for more than three years — is a political trial, the Hong Kong High Court said the defendants had attempted to secure a legislative majority in order to veto government budgets, which may lead to the dissolution of the legislature.

In a statement released after the court handed down the verdicts, Judges Andrew Chan, Alex Lee, and Johnny Chan said the 14 defendants who were found guilty on Thursday had planned to undermine “the power and authority of both the government and chief executive. In our view... that would create a constitutional crisis for Hong Kong.”

Do verdicts set a precedent in Hong Kong?

Some experts say the outcome dealt another blow to the closing of the political environment in Hong Kong.

“This ruling cements the illegality of peaceful protest in the city and equates it as ‘subversion of the state,’” said Maggie Shum, a political scientist at Behrend College at Pennsylvania State University.

In her view, the case sets the precedent for dealing with other peaceful means of protest and dissent in Hong Kong.

“The interpretation from the judges forms an initial framework of how state power is to be understood under the national security law and how broad the scope will be to criminalize all forms of dissent as subversion of state power,” she told DW.

Since the 47 defendants represent a large swath of Hong Kong’s civil society, with people representing different sectors of society, Bickett said the message that the Hong Kong government is trying to send through Thursday’s verdicts is that everyone should toe the line set by the authorities.

“The message they are sending is that in civil society and politics, you need to follow their line, and if you diverge from their line at all, they will go after you,” Bickett told DW.

Ruling shows ‘deterioration of Hong Kong’s political society’

Bickett thinks this means that Hong Kong’s pro-democracy civil society “has been destroyed.”

“We will start seeing Beijing eventually going after people who are nominally in the pro-Beijing camp but have asked for moderation or suggested protecting the independence of the courts or providing some semblance of democracy,” Bickett added.

In his view, the pattern emerging from Hong Kong is what the world has seen in other autocratic countries.

“We fully expect to see it in Hong Kong as well. Civil society is no longer allowed to exist here,” Bickett said.

In addition to crushing Hong Kong’s civil society, Shum, the political scientist, said Hong Kong authorities may also be preparing to shift the target of their crackdown to Hong Kong’s diaspora community.

“The landmark ruling amplifies the deterioration of Hong Kong’s political society inside and outside the city,” she told DW.

The 14, along with the 31 others who pleaded guilty prior to Thursday's proceedings, could face life in jail, with sentencing expected later this year.

Only two of the accused were acquitted. Hong Kong authorities announced later they would appeal the two not guilty verdicts.

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