

Enemy of the state? Agnes Chow, the 21-year-old activist who has China worried

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Hong Kong pro-democracy campaigner who was banned from office says an entire generation of young people is being targeted

If China has its way, Agnes Chow's political career will be over before it begins.

The self-described "average schoolgirl" who transformed into a thorn in the side of the Chinese leadership was last week blocked from running for political office in Hong Kong because of her party's pro-democracy manifesto.

The unprecedented move penalises mere affiliation with a political idea and was designed to prevent Chow and her Demosisto party colleagues from entering the Legislative Council.

It was the latest blow to democracy activists in the former British colony after a year that saw popularly elected lawmakers removed and protest leaders jailed.

In the past, authorities targeted independence activists, but with Chow it was her party's support for the vague idea of "self-determination" that doomed her candidacy.

However, the softly spoken 21-year-old is refusing to go quietly and has called on the international community to defend Hong Kong's right to resist rule from China.

At what was once her campaign headquarters in a tiny studio in a building filled with DIY bookstores and art spaces, Chow predicts a bleak outlook for democracy in Hong Kong unless the international community speaks up.

"The ban against me isn't personal, it's targeting an entire generation of young people who have a different view from the government," she says. "The government only wants young people who will show their affection for China and the Communist party. Any deviation of thought is now unacceptable."

Chow renounced her British citizenship - a requirement to stand for election - and postponed her studies to run for office, but views neither as a sacrifice.

"Many people may see this as a sacrifice, but it's not for me," she says. "I'm committed to fighting for Hong Kong and it's nothing compared to those who have gone to prison."

As the crisis played out in Hong Kong, British prime minister Theresa May met president Xi Jinping in Beijing and pledged to raise the thorny topic of human rights. But Chow saw the visit as a missed opportunity.

"The UK needs to show a stronger attitude, that they are really holding China to account," Chow

says. "I had high expectations of Theresa May's response, compared to other countries, since the UK has an international treaty with China and an obligation to monitor the situation here."

She describes a Foreign Office statement that said the UK was "concerned" over her electoral rejection as "weak and feeble". The European Union and Canada issued more direct rebukes, saying the move "risks diminishing Hong Kong's international reputation as a free and open society".

And US lawmakers recently nominated Chow's fellow activists for the 2018 Nobel peace prize, commending them for being "unflinching in their peaceful and principled commitment to a free and prosperous Hong Kong".

Chow was not always destined to become the target of Beijing's ire. She grew up in what she describes as an apolitical household where social issues were never mentioned.

But when she was 15, she came across a Facebook post showing thousands of young people agitating for change - secondary school students just like her - and never looked back.

Amid government plans to introduce "moral and national education" in 2012 - criticised by opponents as Communist brainwashing - students began staging sit-ins outside government headquarters. Chow joined the demonstrations and it was there she met Joshua Wong, another young activist who would go on to become the most prominent voice in a new generation of democracy advocates.

Together with Wong, Chow represented fresh ideas and a new direction for the opposition, a movement that has been dominated for nearly two decades by politicians who grew up under British colonial rule, which ended in 1997.

The pair, along with Nathan Law, founded the political party Demosisto in the wake of 11 weeks of street protests in 2014 that inspired a generation of young people but ultimately failed to secure concessions from the government over how the city's leader is elected. It was their party's support for "self-determination" which a Hong Kong official said made her ineligible to run.

"The battlefield may have changed, but our commitment to fight for democracy and human rights has not," says Wong. "Maybe we can never run for office again, maybe we can never enter these institutions, but they are just a small slice of a larger cake."

Chow and Wong both fear the government is redefining what types of political positions are unacceptable, and that it will continue its campaign against more traditional opposition politicians. Law was previously elected to the legislature on the same party platform that officials now say is a disqualifying factor.

"[Chow's ban] shows the government will progressively target everyone in the pro-democracy camp," Wong says.

For now, Chow has not decided if she will take her case to court. She has already thrown herself into working on the campaign of the pro-democracy candidate who replaced her, and has staged protests against her ban.

But the government's decision to ban her in effect excludes anyone from her and Wong's party from ever contesting an election, and Chow believes it is only the beginning of a wider plan to silence dissent.

"In the future I worry anyone who opposes any government policy be twisted into enemies of the

state," she says.

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