

End of Hong Kong's Tiananmen vigil? Pockets of defiance as candles, lights, church groups mark June 4 in age of national security law

Friday 4 June 2021, by [SCMP Reporters](#) (Date first published: 5 June 2021).

Police ban traditional mass gathering at Victoria Park for the second straight year citing Covid-19 restrictions and this time lock down venue.

But many people take to the streets in scattered and highly mobile protests, playing cat and mouse with police in scenes reminiscent of 2019 unrest.

Hongkongers commemorated the June 4 anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown with scattered pockets of defiance on Friday, shouting pro-independence slogans on the streets, lighting candles and flashing their phone lights in public, or attending church gatherings, after a heavy police presence stopped them from holding their large-scale annual vigil for the first time in 31 years. While police banned the traditional mass gathering at Victoria Park for the second straight year citing Covid-19 restrictions, this time they locked down the venue to prevent a repeat of 2020 when thousands still forced their way in to light candles in memory of those killed by security forces who crushed weeks of student-led pro-democracy protests with tanks and guns at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989.

But many took to the streets in scattered and highly mobile protests, playing cat and mouse with police in scenes reminiscent of the 2019 anti-government demonstrations.

As of 11.30pm on Friday, police said six people, aged 20 to 75, had been arrested on suspicion of inciting others to participate in an unauthorised assembly, common assault, criminal damage, disorderly conduct in public places and obstruction of officers from performing their duties in different parts of the city. Twelve people were also fined for violating restrictions on public gatherings.

Some on the streets vowed to return in any way they could next year, while others were pessimistic about ever being allowed to again - an outlook shared by political commentators who said the national security law imposed by Beijing spelled an end to the days of the city being the only part of China to hold such mass protests on June 4.

The United States consulate and the European Union office in Hong Kong separately posted photos on social media showing they had lit candles in their premises in an unprecedented move to commemorate the Tiananmen crackdown.

The US consulate posted a statement by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken declaring that the pro-democracy protests of 1989 "echoed in the struggle for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong". In a message on Twitter, the EU's Hong Kong office said: "The European Union upholds universal human rights at home and calls for their respect across the world."

The day began with the arrest of barrister Chow Hang-tung, vice-chairwoman of vigil organiser the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, who was accused of

promoting the event despite the ban.

Police were out in force throughout the day, throwing a tight cordon around the park, stopping and searching people, and keeping a water cannon truck ready.

Scores of defiant protesters gathered outside the park with their phone lights turned on as night fell.

Police raised blue and yellow warning flags, ordering them to leave and making sure they eventually dispersed before closing off the entire park to the public.

Officers raised a purple flag to warn against national security law offences when groups who retreated to Kingston Street and Paterson Street in Causeway Bay began shouting, *"Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times,"* a signature slogan from the 2019 anti-government protests.

In a similar show of defiance, about 50 people formed a glowing line with candles and phones outside the Sogo department store nearby.

The taxi rank in front of the Times Square shopping centre was blocked with rubbish bins by a group wearing black who were chased off by police.

Across the harbour on the Kowloon side, dozens gathered in Mong Kok's Sai Yeung Choi Street, shouting, *"Hong Kong independence, the only way out,"* again prompting police to raise the national security warning flag.

At around the same time, drivers honked car horns outside St Benedict Church in Sha Tin, while groups wearing black flashed their phone lights.

In Mong Kok, a woman in black summed it up for those who remained resentful after the 2019 protests.

"Today is not just about Tiananmen Square but about 2019 ... This is the first time [in many months that] we have been able to gather and have our voices heard," she said.

"Hong Kong people still have the same ideas as before. That has not gone away."

At a small candlelight vigil in Tsuen Wan, a 66-year-old security guard said she preferred to counter the Victoria Park ban by taking part in such scattered gatherings elsewhere.

Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, retired bishop of Hong Kong, led hundreds in prayer at St Andrew's Catholic Church in Hang Hau, saying authorities still failed to listen to people's voices after decades. *"The tragedy of June 4 will not leave us gradually. It may re-emerge ... if the authorities still believe they can kill patriotic young people for the so-called common good,"* he said.

Analysing the defiance on the streets, political scientist Ivan Choy Chi-keung from the Chinese University of Hong Kong suggested that those who were shouting pro-independence slogans only constituted a small minority.

"The laws are too harsh, and people are angry about it," he said. *"Authorities have also been high-handed, making people worry about wearing black, or switching on their phone lights. Hong Kong people value their freedom, and measures like these will not win hearts."*

Dr Cheung Chor-yung, a political scientist at City University, was not surprised that people were still protesting even after many activists had been charged and detained under the national security law.

"In the last two years, the people's mistrust in the unpopular government has not eased. It's because Hong Kong people are peaceful and rational, that they have not vented until now," he said.

Liberal and pro-establishment political commentators alike were of the view that even after the pandemic in future, the sweeping national security law spelled an end to mass vigils at Victoria Park.

Lau Siu-kai, vice-chairman of Beijing-based, semi-official think tank the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies, said it was foreseeable authorities would ban such activities, deeming them harmful to national security.

"The local government this year was not courageous enough to enforce the national security law, so

it cited health grounds as the reason,” he said.

“In the coming few years, the central government will not permit any activities that provide opportunities for the public to vent their anger, including such vigils. I think 2019 was the last year that authorities permitted the annual vigil to be held in Victoria Park.”

Ray Yep Kin-man, another political scientist at City University, expected a repeat of Friday’s massive police deployment in dealing with future mass gatherings.

“The government now acts against intention rather than actual behaviour, and is expected to consider most democratic civil groups as threats,” he said.

Shut out of Victoria Park, the alliance organising the annual vigils posted its traditional declaration on social media, vowing to continue pursuing its stated goals.

“Today the authoritarian regime may seem indestructible, but the tide of freedom and democracy will one day bring down its high walls,” the statement read.

“Release the dissidents! [Vindicate] the 1989 pro-democracy movement! Demand accountability for the June 4 massacre! End one-party dictatorship! Build a democratic China!”

Calling for an end to one-party rule in China goes against the national constitution and could lead to the alliance being banned eventually.

A leading legal scholar who spoke to the Post on condition of anonymity said the slogan could also be regarded as subversive under the national security law.

“It is likely that such activities will not be allowed in the future in the context of applications for assemblies under the Public Order Ordinance,” he said.

But the scholar suggested other activities, such as vigils to remember those who died, were less likely to be considered as violating the security law.

Barrister Ronny Tong Ka-wah, a cabinet-level adviser to Hong Kong’s leader, was also more optimistic that smaller-scale vigils without slogans deemed subversive would still be acceptable in the city when the political climate became more stable.

“This year, it’s just because of the pandemic,” he said. “I still believe there is freedom of assembly and simply mourning should be permitted.”

Reporting by Natalie Wong, Jeffie Lam, Lilian Cheng, Phila Siu, Kanis Leung, Laura Westbrook, Kathleen Magramo, Clifford Lo, Christy Leung, Danny Mok, Jack Lau and Tony Cheung

P.S.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3136142/end-hong-kongs-tiananmen-vigil-pockets-defiance-candles>