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Hong Kong

An Orwellian City Soon Joining an Orwellian State

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On 21 December 2021, the Chinese State Council Information Office released its White Paper “Democratic Progress Under the Framework of One Country, Two Systems”, insisting that what Beijing has done to Hong Kong is simply to uphold its promise concerning Hong Kong’s autonomy. Just eight days after the release of this report, the National Security Bureau of the Hong Kong Police froze the assets of Stand News and arrested current and former members of its management. The news agency announced its closure that night. Surveys in 2016 and 2019 showed that the public considered Stand News to be the most credible source of online news media.

The head of the Hong Kong police, however, thought the otherwise. Back in early December he had already wrongly accused online media of reporting fake news. Soon, based on the colonial law’s Crime Ordinance, he would charge the management of Stand News for conducting “sedition”. Under this draconian law, news reporting can be considered as “sedition”, if the authorities do not like the report. What is even more ironical is that the current law still refers to the Queen of Great Britain, 24 years after the handover – for those who come out in defence of Beijing’s attack on Hong Kong as merely an endeavour to “de-colonize Hong Kong” and “get rid of intervention by foreign forces”, I wonder how they are going to square their circle.

The knock-on effect of the closure of Stand News was soon to be seen. On 2 January this year, another well-known online media, Citizen News, also announced its closure to avoid possible prosecution. Carrie Lam soon dismissed that this was a result of an attack on freedom of the press, claiming that it was only closing of its own account.

Beijing’s frontal attack on freedom of the press had already begun in August 2020, when Jimmy Lai, the boss of Apple Daily, was prosecuted under the newly passed National Security Law. The Daily was forced to close down this June when the authorities went on to freeze its assets. Beijing’s crackdown on Stand News was not a simple repetition of its action on the Apple Daily, however. Whereas the latter was directly involved in the 2019 revolt, the former was much more moderate. It had a clear stand on supporting the democratic movement, yet it had not violated the principle of checks and balance in news reporting. Taking on Stand News is clear evidence of Beijing’s agenda of criminalising news reports altogether.

Foreign correspondents have long been receiving chilling messages as well. In November last year, the Hong Kong government denied a visa to a journalist from *The Economist*. This is on top of a similar event in 2018 when a *Financial Times* journalist was also denied a visa.

The first two major cases of suppression after the implementation of the National Security Law were the prosecution of Jimmy Lai, followed by the prosecution of 47 pan-democrats for holding a primary election ahead of the scheduled legislature election in 2020. The prosecution is unfounded, but this kind of thing is expected under regular authoritarian regimes. Yet, since then Beijing has crossed this threshold, and has marched in triumph to impose its Orwellian regime on Hong Kong.

A review of another two major events since the prosecution of the 47 pan-democrats is enough to make my case. Knowing its extreme unpopularity, Beijing’s faithful servant Carrie Lam, on the pretext of the pandemic, first postponed the September 2020 legislature election by a year to allow Beijing to “improve” the Hong Kong electoral system in March 2021 so that “patriots” could dominant. The “improvement” was to cut the directly elected seats from 35 seats (half of the legislature) to 20, while enlarging the legislature from 70 seats to 90 by adding an “election committee”, mainly comprised of “patriots”, to “elect” 40 legislators, guaranteeing Beijing’s absolute control over the

election, symbolizing the death of Hong Kong's autonomy.

And then on the 23rd of December, the statue Pillar of Shame at the University of Hong Kong was removed in the middle of the night. The statue was created by Danish artist Jens Galschiøt to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Soon after, two more 1989 democratic movement monuments were also removed. These statues had not done what the government accused the 153 persons prosecuted under the National Security law of doing – sabotage, subversion, terrorism, colluding with foreign governments etc. They just stood there, staring at us. Yet Beijing could not even stand silent statues. This once again reminds us that the present crackdown is not limited to silencing political opposition but is also purging artistic and cultural legacies as well. With the disappearance of independent media, the great purge now knows no bounds.

Since the enactment of the National Security Law, fifty influential Hong Kong trade unions and civil organizations have been forced to disband. The same thing had happened to those organizations which were committed to supporting Mainland civil societies but was largely unnoticed. Among them there had been around ten groups in Hong Kong doing China labour solidarity work, but today most are either disbanded or deactivated.

These events also remind us of one thing — that the crackdown since 2020 is less about acting against “collusion with foreign forces”, and more about Beijing's own domestic nightmare, namely the fear of people's memories of the June Fourth massacre and the fear that the democratic movement between mainland China and Hong Kong may join hands, as they did in 1989.

Maybe this is the best time to read or reread George Orwell's fiction *1984* – it increasingly looks like a script written for the Hong Kong Drama. Beijing has destroyed Hong Kong's partial democracy, but it could claim that it was improving its electoral system. After its rigged election was only able to draw 30.2 percent of voters — only half of the turnout for the previous election — its media claimed a big electoral success by knowingly twisting facts. While all the facts are proving that Beijing's agenda is to impose its Orwellian society on Hong Kong, Beijing still claims that it is protecting the former's autonomy. If one wants to know what happens next in Hong Kong, read George Orwell.

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