

CASE STUDY

China wages war on the 'Hong Kong anthem'

WORLD

24_05_2024

**Angeline
Tan**



On May 8, the Hong Kong Court of Appeal **authorized** the government's application for an injunction order to stop anyone from pro-democracy anthem "**Glory To Hong Kong**" made popular during pro-democracy protests in 2019 , overturning a **lower court ruling** in July 2023 that dismissed the government's bid owing to free speech concerns. In its judgment, the pro-China court of appeal characterized the anthem as a "weapon" to

incite violent **protests in 2019** against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing.

Appeal judge Jeremy Poon declared that the composer of the pro-democracy song had “intended it to be a ‘weapon’ and so it had become”. “It had been used as an impetus to propel the violent protests plaguing Hong Kong since 2019. It is powerful in arousing emotions among certain fractions of the society,” Poon wrote.

The song, clandestinely recorded by an anonymous orchestra, rose in popularity during the 2019 Hong Kong protests against the CCP.during the protests. Owing to its popularity, the anthem has been dubbed as “**the national anthem**” of Hong Kong and has been used in various international competitions rather than the Chinese national anthem “March of the Volunteers”.

Its lyrics include the protest slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times”. The Hong Kong government and courts had **claimed** the aforesaid phrase contained secessionist and subversive connotations. “The government... will communicate with relevant internet service providers, request or demand them to remove relevant content in accordance with the injunction order,” said Paul Lam, Hong Kong’s Secretary for Justice. This is meant to “persuade the internet service providers not to provide the convenience and not to facilitate the commission of unlawful acts,” Lam **added**.

Hong Kong-based cybersecurity expert Anthony Lai stated that if a platform were to comply with the ban, it would have to ensure that the song cannot have a Hong Kong IP address or Hong Kong users cannot access the song. “I understand the government’s need to defend national security, but I worry it would take up too much of their resources to police the whole internet,” Lai told AFP, while portraying himself as sympathetic to the Hong Kong government.

Several times, the Hong Kong government asked that Google place “March of the Volunteers” at the top of its search results. Google responded that algorithms form search results, so it **dismissed** Hong Kong’s request.

When the Hong Kong government first tried to outlaw “Glory to Hong Kong” in 2023, Hong Kong Watch, along with over 24 civil society groups, spearheaded efforts to pen **a joint letter** to online tech platforms including Spotify, Apple Inc, Google, and Meta, urging them to resist the government injunction that will effectively criminalize intermediaries that broadcast or distribute the anthem online.

The Hong Kong court ruling came in wake of what critics lambast as a deterioration of individual rights and freedom in Hong Kong, a situation that has witnessed many CCP-

critical figures like devout Catholic Jimmy Lai imprisoned and Cardinal Joseph Zen persecuted, as well as CCP-critical media outlets like Lai's Apple Daily shut down. Moreover, the recent court decision also followed the enactment of Hong Kong's Safeguarding National Security Bill, also known as "Article 23 legislation", which would further outlaw freedoms in the city, according to Hong Kong Watch.

Following the Hong Kong court injunction on May 8, media platform YouTube announced on May 15 that it has blocked "Glory to Hong Kong" according to users' geographic location. A total of 32 video links to the song will no longer appear on the Google search page in Hong Kong. In a statement, YouTube admitted that 32 web links playing "Glory to Hong Kong" have been geoblocked and are currently unavailable in Hong Kong following the aforementioned court order. Efforts to access the videos from Hong Kong produced messages like "This content is not available on this country domain due to a court order" or "This video isn't available anymore." "We are disappointed by the Court's decision but are complying with its removal order by blocking access to the listed videos for viewers in Hong Kong. We'll continue to consider our options for an appeal, to promote access to information," a YouTube spokesperson penned in an emailed reply to news outlet CNN.

Industry groups, including the Asia Internet Coalition, which represents big tech firms like Meta, Apple and Google, have maintained that a free and open internet in Hong Kong was "fundamental" to ensuring the city's edge. Yan Baogang, former director of i-CABLE Finance Info Channel, wrote in a column for The Epoch Times that the Hong Kong court's move will deter international enterprises and professionals from operating in Hong Kong.

"Obviously, the SAR (special administrative region) government does not want to deal a heavy blow to the confidence of foreign investors after the legislation of Article 23, and maintaining [Hong Kong]'s position as a financial center is still an important task for Beijing," Yan wrote. "However, if the United States does ban TikTok, Beijing may take more countermeasures. At that time, Hong Kong officials will be under pressure to take action against social media platforms. I'm afraid that even YouTube and Gmail will have to be taken off the shelves by then." Adding, Yan lambasted the Hong Kong government for kowtowing to the CCP regime in Beijing: "The SAR government officials do not even bother to maintain their autonomy and just do whatever the central authority tells them to do."

Notably, some observers have pointed out how the recent Hong Kong court

decision and other pieces of legislation in the semi-autonomous city **reflect the insecurity of the CCP regime**, censoring people and curtailing information that go against its goals and narrative.

Other analysts have noted how Hong Kong has **regressed** to the Cultural Revolution era under Chinese dictator Mao Zedong, such that any form of music that might give rise to dissent would be censored before they are popularized.

As to how the ramifications of Hong Kong's draconian Article 23 will play out, only time will tell.