



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Hong Kong

July 2026

Context

Reporting period: June 2025 to April 2026

Since 2020, Hong Kong has undergone a sharp transformation in its political and legal environment. The enactment of the [National Security Law \(NSL\)](#) in June 2020 by China's National People's Congress marked a turning point, criminalising acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces.

According to the Hong Kong Government, [385 people](#) had been arrested for national security offences by the end of 2025, with at least 174 convicted. Most of them are civil society actors, journalists, and opposition figures—reflecting the [collapse of civil society and a dramatic shrinking](#) of political space.

In 2021, the government [overhauled the electoral system](#) to ensure only “patriots” could hold elective office, effectively eliminating opposition. The [World Bank's Rule of Law Index](#) shows a [significant drop](#) in rule of law and accountability since 2020. Governance is now dominated by national security imperatives, and dissent is heavily criminalised.

The environment for civil society remains extremely hostile, with further legal tightening under the [Safeguarding National Security Ordinance](#) (SNSO) passed in March 2024. During the reporting period, three further legal mechanisms systematically dismantled remaining pockets of independent civic space:

- The [Trade Unions \(Amendment\) Bill 2025](#) came into effect on 5 January 2026. It subjects foreign funding to state vetoes and strips labour unions of administrative appeal rights.
- [SNSO Subsidiary Legislation](#) enacted in May 2025 designated national security infrastructure as “prohibited places,” penalising non-cooperation with the security apparatus.
- The March 2026 [Amendments to the Implementation Rules for Article 43 of the NSL](#) expanded law enforcement powers to compel device password and decryption, authorised customs officials to seize incoming “seditious” goods, escalated controls over “foreign agents”, and overrode long-standing protections for legal professional privilege.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Hong Kong's [Basic Law](#) (Articles 27-39), the [Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance \(Cap. 383\)](#) (BORO), and [applicable international covenants](#) guarantee freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. However, these rights have been severely undermined by the NSL and the SNSO, which criminalise vague offences like “subversion” and “collusion” and impose heavy penalties. Since 2020, authorities have dismantled civil society through arrests, surveillance, and coercion. Transnational repression and prosecutions of civic actors for exercising protected rights continued in the reporting period. Key events include:

- [The Hong Kong Alliance trial](#) — in which Chow Hang-tung, Albert Ho and Lee Cheuk-yan had been remanded since September 2021 — opened in January 2026 after multiple postponements.
- In July 2025, the National Security Department [added 19 people](#) associated with the “Hong Kong Parliament” initiative to the wanted list for national security offences.

- The case of [Anna Kwok's father](#) — arrested in April 2025, convicted in February 2026 and sentenced to eight months in March 2026 under the SNSO for handling his daughter's insurance funds — established the first prosecution of a family member for assisting an overseas activist.

Researchers in March 2024 [documented](#) that over 90 NGOs and 175 unions have disbanded, including major and long-standing organisations. The wave of dissolutions continued during the reporting period. Notable examples include:

- The [Democratic Party](#) initiated dissolution proceedings in February 2025 and formally disbanded on 14 December 2025, after over 30 years as Hong Kong's largest pro-democracy party.
- The [League of Social Democrats](#) — the last active pro-democracy political party — dissolved on 29 June 2025, reportedly under pressure to disband before 1 July.
- The [Hong Kong Federation of Students](#) announced dissolution on 5 February 2026, ending 68 years of operation. Other groups include the [Riders' Rights Concern Group](#) (30 June 2025), the [RFA Cantonese Service](#) (1 July 2025, after US funding cuts), the [Society for Protection of the Harbour](#) (31 July 2025, following amendments to the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance), the [Hong Kong Baptist University Students' Union](#) (December 2025, after the union memorialised victims of the Tai Po fire on its democracy wall) and [six college students' unions](#) at the Chinese University (December 2025 to early 2026).
- In August 2025, around [300 societies were gazetted](#) for removal from the Societies Register, including six identified democracy or localist groups associated with defendants in the "47 democrats" case (Scholarism, People Power, and four district-based groups).

Independent media outlets are severely affected. The owner and editors of Apple Daily were [convicted](#) on 15 December 2025 of conspiracy to commit collusion with foreign forces and conspiracy to publish seditious publications. Founder Jimmy Lai was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment on 9 February 2026 — the heaviest sentence yet under the NSL — and the six former Apple Daily executives received sentences ranging from 6 years 9 months to 10 years.

Other than suppression by directly arresting and prosecuting leaders of civil society, there are other forms of harassment, such as stigmatisation in state-controlled media, intrusive requests for information from authorities - demands that may expose individuals or organisations to criminal liability or reputational harm - and tax audits. There is also a pattern of [harassing activists' relatives](#).

Independent bookstores and media faced multiple lines of administrative pressure. [Book Punch](#), an independent bookstore, was charged under the Education Ordinance for hosting a Spanish-language class (December 2025) and under the Places of Public Entertainment Ordinance for a stand-up comedy session (January 2026); its owner was arrested in March 2026 in connection with the sale of [allegedly seditious publications](#).

Freedom of assembly came under [intensified pressure](#) through a coordinated system of legal and preventive controls. Authorities have combined [indefinite prosecution of 2019 protestors](#), [selective law enforcement](#) and [pressure](#) against leaders and organisers to target attempts at public assembly, as well as [pre-emptive policing](#) to deter participation in public gatherings. This multifaceted approach – marked by its discriminatory application and chilling effect – has sharply reduced the space for public expression and raises serious concerns under

international human rights standards. There have been no large-scale [demonstrations](#) in Hong Kong since 2021. While law enforcement officials assert that they have [not rejected any protest applications](#) since 2022, this claim obscures how deterrence functions through informal channels rather than explicit prohibitions.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Hong Kong's legal framework governing civil society has undergone significant changes, shifting from a rights-based approach to one emphasising control and national security. While the [Basic Law](#) and the [Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance \(Cap. 383\)](#) provide for fundamental freedoms, recent legislation and amendments have introduced stringent regulations affecting the creation, registration, operation, and financing of civil society organisations (CSOs), nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations, social movements, and trade unions.

CSOs in Hong Kong are typically established either by incorporating as a company limited by guarantee under the [Companies Ordinance](#) (Cap. 622) or by registering under the [Societies Ordinance \(Cap. 151\)](#). Both regulatory frameworks permit deregistration on national security grounds. Empowered by the NSL, authorities have increasingly leveraged these provisions to deregister organisations perceived as security threats. Additionally, the Registry of Trade Unions has used the [Trade Unions Ordinance \(Cap. 332\)](#) to intensify scrutiny on labour groups, demanding detailed disclosures regarding their activities and finances. Across all these frameworks, authorities possess broad powers to compel CSOs to surrender extensive operational and financial data. This places organisations in a precarious position where complying with these demands may expose individuals and groups to reputational harm or legal liabilities—including retroactive scrutiny of actions taken prior to the NSL—while non-compliance risks immediate deregistration or legal action.

During the reporting period three further legal instruments significantly tightened the regulatory environment for civil society.

- The [Trade Unions \(Amendment\) Ordinance 2025](#) was gazetted on 4 July 2025 and came into force on 5 January 2026, empowering the Registrar of Trade Unions to deny registration or merger on national security grounds without right of administrative appeal, permanently barring individuals convicted of national security offences from forming or holding office in unions, requiring prior approval for unions to accept foreign funding (with penalties up to HK\$200,000), mandating notification to the Chief Executive before affiliating with overseas organisations, and granting the Registrar powers to enter union premises and seize documents without a warrant.
- In May 2025, the first [subsidiary legislation under the SNSO](#) designated the premises of the Office for Safeguarding National Security as “prohibited places” and created new offences for non-cooperation.
- On 23 March 2026, the [NSL implementation rules were amended](#) for the first time, expanding decryption and seizure powers.

Disqualifications from professions is a real threat to civil society actors. Former lawmaker and member of the Civic Party [Dr Kwok Ka-ki](#) was struck off the medical register on 16 April 2026 following his national security conviction, the first professional disciplinary sentence for defendants of the Hong Kong 47 case. In July 2024, the [Social Workers Registration](#)

[Ordinance \(Cap. 505\)](#) was [amended](#) to allow the Social Workers Registration Board to permanently deregister individuals convicted of national security offences. The board's composition was also altered to include [more government-appointed members](#), reducing the influence of elected representatives. In March 2025, social worker [Jackie Chen](#) was convicted of rioting related to the 2019 protests. Under the new amendments, she faces [permanent deregistration](#), highlighting the law's impact on professionals involved in civil movements.

Hong Kong's legal profession also faces pressure marked by ongoing complaints to the [Bar Association and Law Society](#) against barristers and solicitors for their participation in civic movements. In response to this climate, some lawyers have chosen to withdraw their registrations voluntarily. High-profile disciplinary actions have underscored this trend. In November 2025, the Notaries Public Disciplinary Tribunal substantiated four complaints against Albert Ho Chun-yan, the lawyer who formerly chaired the Democratic Party and led the Hong Kong Alliance, [suspending his notary public licence](#) for seven years over convictions related to unauthorised assemblies in 2019 and 2020. Similarly, in August 2025, solicitor-activist Kevin Yam was [barred from practising](#) in Hong Kong after a disciplinary committee cited his calls for US sanctions—a ruling [condemned by UN experts](#) as an act of reprisal.

This hostile environment not only infringes upon the rights of lawyers to participate in civic life, but it also creates a chilling effect that discourages legal professionals from accepting politically sensitive cases. On the other hand, the Chief Executive can bar any foreign lawyer from participating in national security cases following an amendment to the [Legal Practitioners Ordinance](#) in 2023. NGOs' access to legal representation is undermined.

These legal developments have created a challenging environment for civil society in Hong Kong, with increased regulatory burdens, restrictions on funding, and limitations on professional practices, all under the broad justification of safeguarding national security.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society has become increasingly inaccessible. The NSL's vague prohibitions on “collusion with foreign forces” (Articles 29-30) have led to heightened scrutiny of foreign funding, deterring international donors and leaving organisations financially vulnerable. The Hong Kong government's official statements have indicated that foreign funding is increasingly viewed as a national security threat. In a [press release](#) in March 2025, the government emphasised the risks posed by external forces using improper means to interfere in Hong Kong's affairs. It is also notable that:

- Tax audits emerged as a key tool of financial pressure. According to the Hong Kong Journalists Association, Hong Kong Free Press together with seven other independent media outlets and several independent bookshops — alongside their staff and family members — were subjected to [tax audits widely seen as politically motivated](#).
- Cultural fundraising and event spaces were similarly affected. In December 2025, playwright Candace Chong's production [“We Are Gay” was cancelled](#) by the West Kowloon Cultural District at short notice.

Local fundraising is also obstructed. Fundraising events organised by groups such as the [Hong Kong Journalists Association](#) and the [Democratic Party](#) held in 2023 and 2024 have been cancelled by various venue providers under unclear circumstances. Venues frequently withdraw at the last minute, likely due to government pressure. In 2026, the Hong Kong

Journalists Association has to pivot to an [online and decentralised fundraising gala](#); whereas the Democratic Party [voted to dissolve](#) in December 2025.

Banking restrictions and asset freezes have crippled civil society actors. The closure of *Apple Daily* was preceded in May 2021 by the Secretary for Security [ordering](#) a freeze of HK\$18 million in corporate assets under [the Implementation Rules](#) for Article 43 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The NSL Implementation Rules Amendments allow for the [confiscation of property](#) from individuals convicted of serious national security offences. Other than the NSL, law enforcement has other tools to freeze or confiscate assets, such as the [Organised and Serious Crimes Ordinance \(Cap. 455\)](#). In February 2026, pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai, the owner of *Apple Daily*, was [convicted under the NSL](#) and sentenced to 20 years in prison under the NSL. The Hong Kong government announced in April 2026 that it is seeking to [confiscate his HK\\$127 million](#) in assets. Also, there are instances where banks cancel the accounts of political parties (such as [League of Social Democrats in 2023](#)) and activists. The lack of access to banking services renders organisational survival extremely difficult. The League of Social Democrats [dissolved in June 2025](#).

Restrictions on union foreign funding became formal law with the [Trade Unions \(Amendment\) Ordinance 2025](#), which came into force on 5 January 2026. Unions must obtain approval from the Registrar of Trade Unions for foreign donations, further limiting access to external resources.

Economic downturns and emigration have further weakened civil society's financial base. Many private donors have left Hong Kong, and government subsidies increasingly come with national security compliance clauses, limiting funding to pro-government organisations. For example, the Social Welfare Department, which provides significant funding to organisations in Hong Kong, states in its [policy](#) that 'NGOs operating subvented services must comply with the laws and regulations related to safeguarding national security. If an NGO participates in any activities that violate the law of safeguarding national security, the Social Welfare Department may consider terminating the "Funding and Service Agreement" with the concerned NGO.' Civil society groups therefore struggle to sustain operations, leading to widespread downsizing or dissolution.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Access to state-held information remains a significant structural barrier for civil society, exacerbating the opacity of government decision-making. Hong Kong lacks a statutory freedom of information law, relying instead on an administrative, non-legally binding [Code on Access to Information](#). This framework limits CSO access to public data through various exemptions, particularly those concerning "security, defence, and international relations" or "internal discussion." In practice, civil society groups report that these categories are being applied more expansively following the implementation of the NSL and the 2024 SNSO, which introduced much broader definitions of "state secrets" and national security. Consequently, CSOs frequently face challenges in obtaining the data necessary for evidence-based advocacy or monitoring government compliance with human rights standards. The absence of robust legal mechanisms to compel disclosure, combined with a lack of reporting requirements on how public input influences policy, severely diminishes civil society's capacity to monitor and hold the government accountable.

At the same time, the Hong Kong government continues to reduce meaningful engagement with civil society, particularly those critical of state policies. The 7 December 2025 [Legislative Council election](#) — held under the “patriots-only” electoral system introduced in 2021 — illustrated the closure of formal political space. Turnout was 31.9%, the second-lowest on record, with a record 3.12% of invalid votes; with the Civic Party already disbanded and the Democratic Party voting to dissolve in December 2025, the legislature contains no opposition voices. On the eve of the election, the Office for Safeguarding National Security [summoned representatives of foreign news outlets](#) and warned against using “freedom of the press” as a pretext to interfere in Hong Kong’s affairs. In a notable but isolated instance of legislative pushback, on 10 September 2025 the Legislative Council [rejected the Government’s same-sex partnership registration bill](#) (71 against, 14 in favour) — the first time a Government bill was voted down in this term — reflecting the rejection by pro-establishment lawmakers of even modest LGBTQ+ rights protections.

The state response to the Tai Po Wang Fuk Court fire on 26 November 2025 (159 dead) further illustrated the constrained space for civic responses. Efforts to express government accountability faced criminalisation: commentator [Wong on-yin](#) was arrested for criticising the official handling of the fire, and a [university student](#) who initiated a public petition was also arrested. The government later established an independent commission of inquiry, but with no binding powers and no civil society participation in its terms of reference.

Public consultations, if any, have become performative, often excluding dissenting voices. For instance, with the same-sex partnership registration bill, the [less than one-week period](#) for collecting submissions in July 2025 was the government’s sole effort to engage the public on the proposal, despite having had two years—since the top court in 2023 ordered the creation of a framework recognising same-sex partnerships—to do so. Additionally, in March 2026, the government unilaterally introduced significant [amendments to the National Security Law Implementation Rules](#) without any public consultation or prior explanation.

The government has also shown hostility toward international oversight. During a UN Human Rights Committee review of Hong Kong in 2022, government officials [repeatedly evaded questions](#) on whether civil society engagement with the UN could be criminalised under national security laws. This refusal to affirm the legality of such engagement creates a chilling effect and undermines open cooperation with international human rights mechanisms. The government has also fallen significantly behind on its reporting obligations: although the HKSAR’s fourth report under the Convention against Torture (CAT) was [submitted](#) as part of China’s seventh report in February 2025, this came five years overdue, and nearly a decade after the previous review in November 2015, well beyond the four-year reporting cycle. Delays compound the closure of consultative space and weaken meaningful international scrutiny.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The systematic stigmatisation of democracy advocates as national security threats has fostered a climate of profound public caution, deterring civic participation through the looming threat of criminalisation.

The “soft resistance” framing has been extended to administrative and cultural spaces. From July 2025, state-aligned outlet *Wen Wei Po* ran repeated front-page [attacks on the](#)

[independent bookstore Book Punch](#), framing it as a node of “soft resistance” and triggering complaints to the Education Bureau.

National security education has expanded. Students and teachers, including non-Chinese-speaking participants, were sent on a [national security study tour](#) to Beijing and Nanjing in early 2026. [Independent film awards](#) have resumed but only under explicit NSL compliance clauses, institutionalising self-censorship in cultural production.

Independent media has been dismantled to a large extent, leaving pro-government outlets to dominate public discourse. Local independent news outlets continue to operate, albeit under challenging circumstances. Protests and political opposition are [framed as past “chaos”](#) that the NSL has resolved. The Hong Kong Journalists Association has been vilified, and political cartoons and books critical of the government have [been removed](#) from public circulation.

The government has launched a “rebuttal team” that has publicly countered criticism [over 200 times](#) since the NSL took effect, often labelling concerns as disinformation or “soft resistance.” Even traditionally pro-government outlets like [Sing Tao Daily have been targeted](#) for publishing opposing views on tobacco control policies. In another notable case, the [Ming Pao newspaper](#) was reprimanded by the Secretary for Security in January 2024 after it published an editorial calling for transparency and accountability—accused of being “irresponsible” and misleading the public. Such actions reinforce a political culture in which critical voices, even when moderate and reasoned, are delegitimised and framed as threats to state authority.

High-profile trials, such as the [conviction](#) of 45 pro-democracy politicians in 2024, have reinforced the narrative that dissent is criminal. Self-censorship is [pervasive](#), with ordinary citizens avoiding political discussion online or in public. The space for independent thought has narrowed considerably, and civil society voices are either silenced or forced into exile.

While statutory anti-discrimination ordinances cover race, sex, and disability, they notably omit sexual orientation and gender identity; constitutional protections under the Basic Law exist but only apply against public authorities, leaving individuals vulnerable in the private sphere.

As the broader civic space shrinks, organisations serving marginalised communities have been forced to pivot strictly to non-political service delivery models. Social welfare groups providing basic services continue to function, but the space for systemic rights-based advocacy has practically vanished. This deterioration is evident in the dissolution of [Hong Kong Unison](#) in February 2025, a prominent NGO advocating for ethnic minority rights, which signalled that the political environment can no longer sustain independent advocacy for these groups. Similarly, while LGBTQI+ organisations continue to exist, their operational space is highly precarious, with public events frequently facing arbitrary cancellations (the latest instance being the [Pink Dot carnival](#) scheduled for June 2026). When the government does engage on these issues—such as the 2025 same-sex partnership registration bill—it tightly controls the format, restricting input to written submissions that disadvantage marginalised groups lacking legal literacy or institutional resources. Consequently, while these groups are not legally barred from public life, their ability to organise, advocate, and shape policy has been systematically dismantled.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Hong Kong maintains an exceptionally robust and affordable digital infrastructure. According to [DataReportal's 2026 data](#), internet penetration is near-universal at 96.8%, with mobile connections equivalent to 283% of the population. Data costs are highly accessible, with high-speed 1 Gbps fixed broadband available for under HKD 150 (USD 20) per month, and prepaid mobile data starting around HKD 30 to 50 (USD 4-6). The traditional digital divide is minimal, leaving only 3.2% of the population offline, primarily among the elderly.

However, Hong Kong's digital environment has grown increasingly hostile due to heightened surveillance, shrinking online freedoms, and growing self-censorship. The NSL, [the Implementation Rules](#) and the SNSO have enabled broad powers to police online expression. In March 2026, a [68-year-old man](#) was convicted for publishing 130 "seditious" Facebook posts, despite his account having only around a dozen friends. Between March 2024 and May 2025, at least six people were prosecuted under sedition provisions for social media posts critical of authorities. It reinforces the observation that even [symbolic](#) or low-engagement speech—such as [calling a protester a "martyr"](#)—has resulted in imprisonment. In one case, a veteran [teacher lost her pension](#) over private Facebook comments before the court overturned the penalty.

The March 2026 NSL amendments significantly weakened digital privacy. [Refusing to provide passwords](#) or decryption assistance to police in national security investigations now carries up to one year's imprisonment, eliminating meaningful confidentiality for journalists, lawyers and other professionals.

Authorities continue to target digital platforms. Under the Implementation Rules, police may compel internet providers to delete content or provide user data without court oversight. In May–June 2025, the mobile game [Reversed Front: Bonfire](#) became the first video game banned under the NSL Implementation Rules (Article 43), with police compelling Apple and Google to remove it from their Hong Kong app stores. In October 2024, the liberal-leaning [media outlet Flow was blocked](#) in Hong Kong, later [forced to suspend operations](#). Public trust in global platforms has eroded, especially after [testimony in 2025](#) revealed Meta allegedly routed viral posts in Hong Kong for political review.

Information available on the internet has reduced. For example, the Ombudsman [removed historical reports](#) from its website, restricting access to physical copies only and prohibiting duplication. This limits public scrutiny and access to administrative accountability.

The Hong Kong Government's "SmartView" CCTV programme was substantially expanded during the reporting period. The first 2,000 cameras were installed by the end of 2024. In October 2025, Security Secretary Chris Tang Ping-keung told the Legislative Council Security Affairs Panel that the programme would be expanded to approximately [60,000 cameras citywide by 2028](#) — adding roughly 20,000 cameras each year — with around HK\$4 billion in funding. Tang stated that AI applications already used for crowd management and licence-plate recognition "will naturally be applied to people, such as tracking a criminal suspect." In February 2026, Police Commissioner Joe Chow Yat-ming indicated that real-time facial recognition could be integrated into the [SmartView network](#) within 2026, with high-traffic shopping centres prioritised and private CCTV systems progressively connected to the police network. Police credited SmartView with solving over 400 cases and [787 arrests](#) since its launch in 2024.

As civic space contracts offline, some civil society actors have increasingly turned to digital platforms for outreach, mobilisation, and cultural expression. In 2024, after the government cancelled a fully booked venue, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) hosted its

[fundraising concert online](#); in 2025, HKJA again moved [online for fundraising events](#) after its gala venue was repeatedly cancelled. Other organisations have similarly migrated events to Zoom, YouTube, or private forums, reflecting both resilience and adaptation.

However, while widespread connectivity allows for digital outreach, a high level of state monitoring leaves users very vulnerable to the criminalisation of online expression detailed above. There is also scepticism towards the safety of digital platforms. Furthermore, the digital environment is increasingly shaped by significant disinformation and information manipulation.

Digital literacy within civil society has improved modestly in recent years, but knowledge of encryption tools and data security remains uneven. Many smaller or grassroots CSOs lack the resources to protect their communications, leaving them vulnerable to intrusion or monitoring.

Challenges and Opportunities

The expected 2026 conclusion of foundational national security trials, such as the Hong Kong Alliance case, retroactively criminalises decades of peaceful advocacy. This permanently shifts the legal baseline, normalising severe prison sentences for historical dissent.

Unilateral legal mechanisms, like the unconsulted March 2026 NSL amendments, institutionalise arbitrary rule-making. Because the boundaries of "national security" shift unpredictably without public or legislative scrutiny, civic actors face total risk opacity, making organisational survival and strategic planning impossible.

Authorities are aggressively severing connections between domestic groups and the international community. By weaponising extraterritorial warrants, enforcing strict foreign funding bans, and prosecuting the local family members of overseas activists, the state deliberately isolates actors on the ground and criminalises global solidarity.

In terms of opportunities, the government's urgent need to project stability to retain Hong Kong's status as a global financial hub creates a strategic friction point. Sustained international scrutiny—particularly during UN treaty body reviews or foreign trade assessments—leverages this economic sensitivity, remaining one of the few mechanisms capable of deterring the most extreme administrative crackdowns.

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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