

Joshua Wong's Testimony
Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Hearing: "Hong Kong's Summer of Discontent and U.S. Policy Responses"
September 17, 2019

Good morning Chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Rubio, and members of this Commission:

It's an honor to be invited back to Capitol Hill to speak about developments in Hong Kong. You may recall that I last traveled to Washington more than two years ago and testified before this commission, in this same building, on May 3, 2017.

At the time, I warned about the probable disqualification of my friend Nathan Law, who had been Asia's youngest democratically-elected legislator and who is in the audience this morning. I also warned about massive political prosecution. Unfortunately, both materialized: Nathan lost his seat that July, and we were both imprisoned in August for our roles in the Umbrella Movement. Further legal troubles in relation to the 2014 protests prevented me from traveling abroad.

While I said then that Hong Kong's "One Country, Two Systems" was becoming "One Country, One-and-a-Half Systems," I don't think there is any doubt among observers who have followed recent events that, today, we are approaching dangerously close to "One Country, One System." The present state of affairs reveals Beijing's utter inability to understand, let alone govern, a free society.

The ongoing demonstrations began on June 9 when one million Hong Kongers took to the streets in protest of proposed legislation that would've allowed criminal suspects to be extradited from Hong Kong to China, where there are no guarantees of the rule of law. Still, before the night had even ended, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced the bill's reading would resume in three days. Hong Kongers were bracing for their last fight on June 12.

And then the unthinkable happened: Knowing that Beijing controlled enough votes in the Legislative Council, protesters surrounded the complex early in the morning, successfully preventing lawmakers from convening. I was then serving my third jail sentence. For a moment, I wondered why the news channel was replaying footage of the Umbrella Movement, though it was not long before I realized Hong Kongers were back. Lam suspended the bill on June 15, but

fell short of fully withdrawing it. A historic two million people demonstrated the following day, equivalent to one in four out of our entire population. I'm not aware of anything comparable to this level of discontent against a government in modern history.

I was released exactly three months ago, on June 17, and have since joined fellow Hong Kongers to protest in the most creative ways possible. In addition to the bill's withdrawal, we demanded Lam to retract the characterization of us as "rioters," drop all political charges, and establish an independent investigation into police brutality. Some of us crowdfunded for newspaper advertisements ahead of the G-20 summit in late June calling for the world not to neglect Hong Kong. Others broke into and occupied the Legislative Council complex on July 1, the same day another 550,000 Hong Kongers protested peacefully.

Crowds continued to show up in large numbers every weekend, with smaller rallies taking place almost daily across the territory. But the government would not listen; instead of defusing the political crisis, it dramatically empowered the police. The movement reached a turning point on July 21. That night, thugs with suspected ties to organized crime gathered in the Yuen Long train station and indiscriminately attacked not just protesters returning home, reporters on the scene, but even passersby. The police refused to show up despite repeated emergency calls, plunging Hong Kong into a state of anarchy and mob violence.

On August 5 alone, the day Hong Kongers participated in a general strike, the police shot 800 canisters of tear gas to disperse the masses. Compare that to only 87 fired in the entire Umbrella Movement five years ago, and the police's excessive force today is clear. Their increasingly liberal use of pepper spray, pepper balls, rubber bullets, sponge bullets, bean bag rounds, and water cannons — almost all of which are imported from Western democracies — are no less troubling. In light of this, I applaud Chairman McGovern for introducing the PROTECT Hong Kong Act last week in the House of Representatives. American companies mustn't profit from the violent crackdown of freedom-loving Hong Kongers.

Co-Chairman Rubio is also right for recently writing that "Hong Kong's special status," under American law, "depends on the city being treated as a separate customs area, on open international financial connections, and on the Hong Kong dollar's peg to the U.S. dollar." Beijing shouldn't have it both ways, reaping all the economic benefits of Hong Kong's standing in the world while eradicating our sociopolitical identity. This is the most important reason why the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act enjoys the broad support of Hong Kong's civil society, a point which I want every member of Congress to take note.

Lam finally withdrew the bill earlier this month, but just as protesters have long stopped calling for her resignation, this decision was almost meaningless by now. The movement is far from over, because it has long moved beyond one bill or one person. Our fifth and most important demand is genuine structural change in Hong Kong. Our government's lack of representation lies at the heart of the matter.

As I speak, Hong Kong is standing at a critical juncture. The stakes have never been higher. Authorities have all but stopped issuing permits known as "letters of no objection," so virtually every demonstration is an "illegal assembly." Moreover, we are confronted by the huge Chinese military buildup just across the border in Shenzhen. President Xi Jinping is unlikely to take bold action before the upcoming 70th National Day in October, but no one can be sure what's next. Sending in the tanks remains irrational, though not impossible. Chinese interference in Macau, Taiwan, Tibet, and especially Xinjiang, serves as a reminder that Beijing is prepared to go far in pursuit of its grand imperial project.

I was once the face of Hong Kong's youth activism. In the present leaderless movement, however, my sacrifices are minimal, compared to those among us who have been laid off for protesting, who have been injured but too afraid of even going to a hospital, or who have been forced to take their own lives. Two have each lost an eye. The youngest of the 1,400 arrested so far is only 12-year-old schoolboy. I don't know them, yet their pain is my pain. We belong to the same imagined community, struggling for our right of self-determination so we can build one brighter, common future.

A baby born today will not even have celebrated his 28th birthday by July 1, 2047, when Hong Kong's policy of "50-year no change" is set to expire. That deadline is closer to us than it appears; there's no return. Decades from now, when historians look back, I'm sure that 2019, much more so than 2014, will turn out to have been a watershed. I hope, too, that historians will celebrate the United States Congress for having stood on the side of Hong Kongers, the side of human rights and democracy.