

# [***Beneath the calm, Hong Kong's new security law drives deeper, quieter changes***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BR8-2BB1-JC5B-G3RN-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

HONG KONG — On the surface, life in Hong Kong after a broad [*new national security law*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-china-legislative-council-national-security-law-37e1aca2daef8a4f9f998f389ff3d7f5) recently took effect appears unchanged.

A [*2020 security law*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-europe-business-5a7f50d5d5027fda34f9addeb883e809) drew thousands of protesters to the streets when it was enacted. Now, that’s seen as too risky. This time, no arrests made headlines. There were no newsroom raids.

Instead, there’s a deeper, quieter wave of adaptation underway among Hong Kong residents who are living under the threat of more extensive restrictions after the [*Safeguarding National Security Ordinance*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-article-23-new-security-law-52dc068e5a82dd9ba4ea5bcd7b166290) took effect on March 23.

At an immigration expo during the law's first two days, immigration consultant Ben Li's booth was constantly busy, its small white tables all occupied. Inquiries about moving abroad jumped about 40% from last year's expo. More than half of those asking cited the new ordinance, known locally as [*Article 23*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-new-security-law-explainer-633e91d7d3aef09381b349282a7dec1f), as a reason to consider emigration.

“The Article 23 legislation has brought a significant catalyzing effect,” Li said.

China promised to keep Hong Kong's relative freedom and way of life unchanged for 50 years when Britain handed over control of its former colony to Communist-ruled Beijing in 1997. Those Western-style civil liberties, such as free speech and a free press, were the cornerstones of the city’s status as an international financial hub.

But since the [*2020 law*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-europe-business-5a7f50d5d5027fda34f9addeb883e809) was imposed by Beijing after months of anti-government protests, they have been sharply curtailed. Many pro-democracy activists have been arrested, silenced or forced into exile. Dozens of civil society groups have been [*disbanded*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-democracy-c65fa4bf3cda740dee680bc2db23e977). Outspoken media like Apple Daily and Stand News have been [*shut down*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-europe-newspapers-business-97cf6aec4153c9201ae8cda679ff0e3d). And many disillusioned young professionals and middle-class families have emigrated to Britain, Canada and Taiwan.

Hong Kong's Basic Law, or constitution, mandated that the city enact a national security law, but for 27 years the Legislative Council didn't pass one, with widespread opposition to an earlier attempt to enact such a law in 2003. The Hong Kong government asserts the law is needed to prevent a recurrence of the tumultuous 2019 protests. It says the law balances national security with safeguarding freedoms.

Still, many fear falling afoul of the law — which targets colluding with “external forces” to endanger security, unlawful disclosure of state secrets, sabotage and espionage, among others. Grave acts such as treason and insurrection are punishable by up to life in prison. Some provisions allow criminal prosecution for acts committed anywhere in the world.

Facing those risks, some people have opted to play it safe.

An independent bookstore owner said it took about 30 books off the shelves, fearing it might be accused of distributing seditious publications. The titles were about the 2019 protests, Tibet and Xinjiang, all politically sensitive topics in mainland China. The books will be trashed.

The owner, who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to fear of government retribution, said they removed the books because of the harsher provisions of the new law, which allows police to seek court approval to extend the detention of suspects without charges and prohibit suspects from consulting certain lawyers. The bookseller worried they would not have a fair trial if charged.

“It's a pity," the bookseller said. “This is an unnecessary infringement of freedom of speech.”

Under the law, sedition offenses carry a sentence of up to seven years, or 10 years if a person is convicted of working with foreign governments or organizations to carry out the activities. The government maintains that criticism intended to improve its policies will not be prosecuted, but there has been less leeway for public dissent since the 2020 law took effect.

The League of Social Democrats, one of Hong Kong's few remaining pro-democracy parties, will be more careful about its publicity materials to avoid being considered seditious, said its chairwoman, Chan Po-ying.

“When things are uncertain, anyone would get worried,” she said.

John Burns, an honorary professor of ***politics*** and public administration at the University of Hong Kong, said residents are adopting coping strategies seen on mainland China, avoiding voicing opinions that might get them in trouble. But Hong Kong still has more space for dissent than the mainland, he said.

“So caution rules,” he said.

Days after the law took effect, the U.S.-funded news outlet [*Radio Free Asia*](https://apnews.com/article/radio-free-asia-close-bureau-hong-kong-eb5dcb279c29fcca223e2dabcca6d9b4) announced it was closing its Hong Kong bureau because of safety concerns under the new legislation and pointed to criticism by authorities. It was yet another narrowing of the space for press freedom at a time when local journalists are struggling with how to adjust to potential new risks.

Ronson Chan, an editor at online media Channel C HK, is personally handling sensitive stories to minimize risks for his colleagues due to the wider scope of the law's definition of state secrets. The defintion echoes the one used in mainland China, which covers economic, social and technological developments and criminal investigations, beyond traditional areas of national security.

The law also is also prompting adjustments in the legal and business communities.

Dominic Chiu, a senior analyst at the Eurasia Group, said some companies, including law firms, already had taken the precaution of restricting access for their Hong Kong staff to their global databases. That might not involve an “all-out ban,” but instead might require special approval to access foreign clients' files, he said.

Those steps, taken even before the first draft of the new law was made public, were prompted by a belief that Hong Kong will eventually align its data security policies with those in mainland China. So the companies aligned their data policies with those of mainland China, Chiu said.

Banks and technology companies have not yet made plans to leave Hong Kong, said George Chen, Hong Kong-based managing director for The Asia Group, a Washington-headquartered business and policy consultancy. After all, many of them operate in other Chinese cities. But some companies are internally reviewing whether certain sensitive roles, such as those handling user data, should be moved elsewhere, he said.

In an emailed response to questions from The Associated Press, the government said it strongly condemned “all scaremongering and smearing remarks” about the law. It said other countries have similar laws and that the law just improves Hong Kong's legal framework for safeguarding national security, thereby creating a more stable business environment.

“To single out Hong Kong and suggest that journalists and businesses would only experience concerns when operating here but not in other places would be grossly biased, if not outrageous,” it said.

Officials say the law only targets “an extremely small minority of people” who jeopardize security, similar to what mainland Chinese officials say about Beijing's own expanding national security precautions.

George Chen would like to hear less about the topic.

“Hong Kong has been through a lot over the past few years and now we hear more and more clients telling us — can Hong Kong now move on?” Chen said. “Let’s talk less about national security every day but focus more on the real economy and business.”

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Associated Press writer Zen Soo contributed to this report.

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