

CHINA

Thousands Rally in Hong Kong for U.S. Bill Supporting City's Autonomy

Protesters believe law would compel city's leaders to maintain separate system of government from mainland's



A mask-wearing protester waved an American flag during the rally in Hong Kong's Central district on Monday evening. PHOTO: LIAU CHUNG-REN/ZUMA PRESS

By Mike Cherney

Updated Oct. 14, 2019 2:14 pm ET

HONG KONG—Tens of thousands of protesters waving U.S. flags and with “The Star-Spangled Banner” blaring from loudspeakers gathered in downtown Hong Kong late Monday to call for U.S. lawmakers to pass legislation that would increase scrutiny of freedoms in the city.

Congress is due soon to consider the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, a bipartisan bill that, if passed, would require the secretary of state to certify Hong Kong's autonomy every year for the city to continue receiving the special treatment that has helped it become a global financial hub. Protesters believe its passage would compel Hong Kong's leaders to maintain the city's separate system of government from mainland China's.

“The American government could help us by passing the law; then at least there is some punishment and some pressure put on the government,” said a woman, 27, who gave her family

name as Lo and said she works in banking. She held a sign with an image of Uncle Sam and protest slogans.



A sea of protesters, some waving U.S. flags, at Monday night's Hong Kong rally. PHOTO: ANTHONY WALLACE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, a co-sponsor of the Hong Kong bill, said on a visit to the city on Monday that it was possible that the U.S. House of Representatives could vote on the bill as soon as this week, though that would depend on House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas also visited Hong Kong over the weekend. Asked about the possibility that a change in Hong Kong's special status could damage the economy, Mr. Hawley said the goal isn't to harm Hongkongers. He said the bill aims to "hold accountable Beijing and to hold accountable those who would seek to diminish the liberties of this city." He said of Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam "it's my impression she doesn't act independently of Beijing."

"We are seeing in Hong Kong a slide toward a police state and potentially the withering away of representative democracy in the city," Mr. Hawley said.

Turnout at Monday's event, the first major gathering approved by police in more than two weeks, was higher than some protesters expected and followed a weekend of smaller gatherings that sometimes turned violent. Protesters attributed the larger turnout Monday to the police approval, which reduced the risk of arrest for people who otherwise would be wary of going to an illegal gathering. Some wore masks despite a city ban on the act.

Monday's rally was largely peaceful, though some arrests were made at the end when protesters tried to block a road, according to local media reports. Organizers estimated 130,000 attended, while police put the number at about 25,000.

Hong Kong's protests began over an extradition bill that could have allowed people to be sent to



Sen. Josh Hawley speaks to reporters in Hong Kong on Monday. He said it is important for protesters to express their views peacefully. PHOTO: MOHD RASFAN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

China for trial. Though the government has pledged to withdraw that bill, protesters are now calling for a broader democratic overhaul and an inquiry into police conduct. The protests have hit Hong Kong's economy and complicated President Trump's trade negotiations with China.

Mr. Hawley said that the purpose of his trip was to collect facts and that he had visited protests on Sunday night, adding that it is important for protesters to express their views peacefully.

Protests in recent weeks have often been violent—with protesters smashing subway stations and attacking businesses they see as pro-China, while police have made hundreds of arrests and shot two teenage protesters.

Mr. Hawley said he hadn't met with any Hong Kong government officials.

On Sunday, Mrs. Lam's office criticized Mr. Cruz for saying he hadn't seen protesters' violent acts and said she had cancelled a meeting with Mr. Cruz because she had other commitments.

"Foreign politicians should put thought into the actions they would have taken if the same situation happened in their own country, instead of criticizing Hong Kong irresponsibly or even expressing support or endorsement in any form for violent acts," Mrs. Lam's office said Sunday.

Mr. Cruz met with reporters on Saturday dressed in all black, which he said expressed solidarity with protesters. He said he believed that the Hong Kong bill would likely pass Congress with bipartisan backing.



Sen. Ted Cruz visited the U.S. Consul General's house in Hong Kong at the weekend, dressed in black in solidarity with the protesters. **PHOTO:** JOHN RUWITCH/REUTERS

“It is a powerful demonstration of American support to the men and women of Hong Kong,” Mr. Cruz said. “The Chinese government hopes that it can silence and oppress the people of Hong Kong in the dark of night without anybody noticing.”

A Chinese government spokesperson in Hong Kong described Mr. Cruz's remarks as “ludicrous.”



A protester holds a sign expressing gratitude to the U.S. for supporting Hong Kong at Monday evening's demonstration. **PHOTO:** LIAU CHUNG-REN/ZUMA PRESS

In a sign of the deep economic toll on the city from more than four months of protests, Hong Kong's Monetary Authority said Monday that it had reduced the amount of capital that banks have to hold by lowering a key ratio for the first time in years.

The city's so-called countercyclical capital buffer, a cushion for banks on top of other regulatory requirements, was lowered to 2% from 2.5%. The reduction allows banks to free up more funds

for lending, which could stimulate the economy while businesses are struggling with falling sales and disruptions.

—*Natasha Khan contributed to this article.*

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