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Why is Xi so hard on Hong Kong?

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OPINION

On Sunday, the Hong Kong authorities charged 47 pro-democracy activists with "conspiracy to commit subversion" against the Chinese government under the national security law it imposed on the city last summer. Beijing must be happy with the catch, which elegantly nets under a single accusation both advocates of outright independence for Hong Kong and the city's old-school loyal opposition. The People's Republic of China is safe now. Glory to its leader.

But what exactly was these criminals' crime? Organizing or taking part in primaries in July ahead of legislative elections initially scheduled for September, and for daring to strategize. Were the pro-democracy camp to win a majority, some participants said at the time, it could vote down the government's budget, possibly forcing it to resign. Under Hong Kong law, the chief executive must step down if the budget is defeated twice.

In the end, the authorities postponed the election, citing health risks because of the pandemic. (The opposition said the real reason was fear of a searing defeat.) And now the government is saying that what was a perfectly legal electoral strategy amounts to an act of subversion against Beijing, punishable by life in prison — possibly to be served out in China.

The onslaught continues in other ways, too. Journalists are being arrested for criticizing the Hong Kong government or investigating police brutality. Radio Television Hong Kong, the public broadcaster, can no longer show BBC programs. A student union is being silenced for its political views. The government is considering requiring district councilors — the vast majority of whom are in the political opposition — to pledge their loyalty to Beijing or else be disqualified.

Why is Beijing still going after Hong Kong so hard when the repression generates pushback from much of the world?

One explanation is that there is a gap between China's national interests and the personal ambitions of its leader, Xi Jinping.

Mr. Xi seems intent on remaining president beyond his second term; he maneuvered to have term limits eliminated in 2018. His many titles and pow-

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The New York Times publishes opinion from a wide range of perspectives in hopes of promoting constructive debate about consequential questions.

A writer relies on his iffy memory

Pulitzer winner discusses how events real and (yes) imagined shape his work

BY ALEXANDRA ALTER

In one of Viet Thanh Nguyen's earliest memories, he is on a boat leaving Saigon.

It was 1975, and he and his family had been turned away from the airport and the American Embassy but eventually got on a barge, then a ship. He can't remember anything about the escape, other than soldiers on their ship firing at refugees who were approaching in a smaller boat.

It is Nguyen's only childhood memory from Vietnam, and he isn't sure if it really happened or if it came from something he read in a history book. To him, whether he personally witnessed the shooting doesn't matter.

"I have a memory that I can't rely on, but all the historical information points to the fact that all this stuff happened, if



Heading to a protest in Yangon, Myanmar. The country's security forces have killed at least 25 people and detained more than 1,100 since a coup on Feb. 1.

Britain trades blows with E.U. in blame game

LONDON

Both sides believe they can get political mileage out of their ugly divorce

BY MARK LANDLER

Few people on either side of the English Channel believed that Britain's exit from the European Union would go off without a hitch. So when horror stories surfaced about rotting shellfish, empty delivery trucks and eye-popping customs fees, many reacted less with shock than grim resignation.

But Britain and the European Union have also fallen out politically and diplomatically, with a speed and bitterness that has surprised even pessimists about the relationship. While these strains are less tangible to Britons than having to pay extra costs for imported coffee from Italy, they could have an equally corrosive long-term effect.

"These are not purely teething problems," said Kim Darroch, who served as Britain's permanent representative to the European Union and later as ambassador to Washington, citing the British government's all-purpose explanation for Brexit problems. "They are structural problems that arise from not being in the single market. This is what a 'hard Brexit' looks like."

Tensions have flared on matters large and small since a new trade agreement formalized Brexit on Jan. 1. The British refused to grant full diplomatic status to the European Union's envoy to London. European leaders lashed out at shortages in the supply of a British-made coronavirus vaccine and briefly threatened to rip up the agreement governing trade with a post-Brexit Northern Ireland.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson replaced the minister responsible for dealing with Brussels, Michael Gove, an ambitious politician known for his emollient manner, with David Frost, a more rough-edged functionary who hampered out the trade agreement between Britain and the European Union.

In a recent speech that sketched out his vision of a "Global Britain," Mr. Johnson pledged to deepen trans-Atlantic ties and even build Britain's presence in the Pacific. But he barely mentioned the European Union. When he did, it was to emphasize how much Britain would gain by severing ties with it.

"The U.K. really needs a special relationship, a deeply interlinked relationship, with the E.U.," said Jeremy Shapiro, research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a research institute in London. "But this government has defined itself ideologically as not needing the E.U. for anything."

Some of these tensions are the inevitable result of what was, after all, an acrimonious divorce, four and a half years BRITAIN, PAGE 2

Myanmar's high-tech tyranny

Generals use an arsenal of powerful tools, some Western, to stifle dissent

BY HANNAH BEECH

During a half-century of military rule, Myanmar's totalitarian tools were crude but effective. Men in sarongs shadowed democracy activists, neighbors informed on one another and thugs branched lead pipes.

The generals, who staged a coup a month ago, are now back in charge with a far more sophisticated arsenal at their disposal: Israeli-made surveillance drones, European devices to crack iPhones and American software that can hack into computers and vacuum up their contents.

An influx of technology, including satellite and telecommunications upgrades, helped people in Myanmar go online and integrate with the world after decades of isolation. Other systems, such as spyware, were sold as integral to modernizing law enforcement agencies.

But critics say a ruthless military, which maintained a dominance over the economy and powerful ministries even as it briefly shared power with a civilian government, used the facade of democ-



Left, a surveillance camera in Yangon. Right, an armored vehicle believed to be made by Gaia Automotive Industries, an Israeli manufacturer, in Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital. The vehicles went into mass production after an Israeli ban on military exports.



AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

racy to enable sensitive cybersecurity and defense purchases.

Some of these "dual-use" technologies, tools of both legitimate law enforcement and repression, are being deployed by the Tatmadaw, as the Myanmar military is known, to target opponents of the Feb. 1 coup — a practice that echoes actions taken against critics by China, Saudi Arabia, Mexico and other governments.

In Myanmar, they are the digital weapons of repression for an intensifying campaign in which security forces

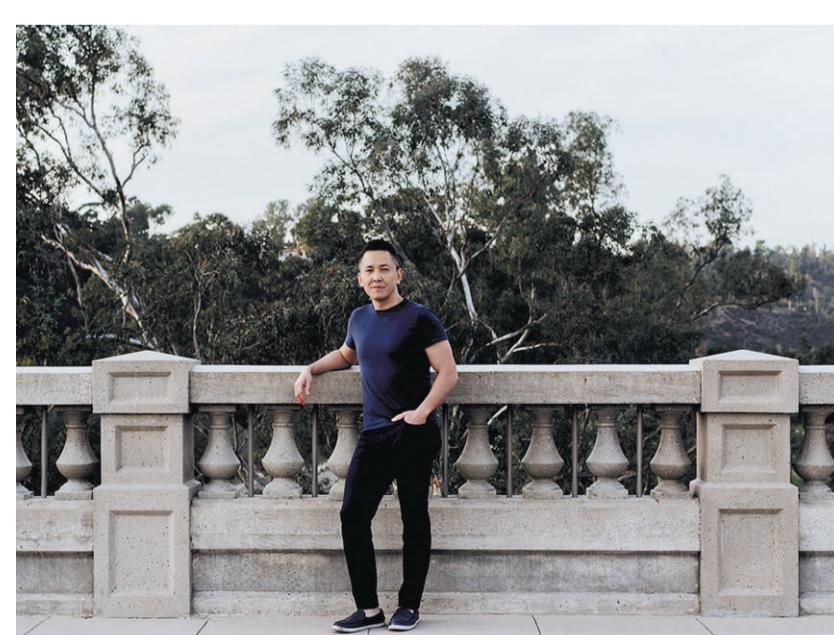
have killed at least 25 people and detained more than 1,100, including the ousted civilian leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. On Monday, she was hit with new criminal charges — making a statement that could alarm the public and induce someone to act against the state — that could put her in prison for years.

"The military is now using those very tools to brutally crack down on peaceful protesters risking their lives to resist the military junta and restore democracy," said Ma Yadanar Maung, a spokeswoman for Justice For Myanmar, a

group that monitors the Tatmadaw's abuses.

Hundreds of pages of Myanmar government budgets for the last two fiscal years viewed by The New York Times show a voracious appetite for the latest in military-grade surveillance technology.

The documents, provided by Justice for Myanmar, catalog tens of millions of dollars earmarked for technology that can mine phones and computers, as well as track people's live locations and listen MYANMAR, PAGE 4



"I think things happened that didn't happen," said Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose latest book, "The Committed," is a sequel to his award-winning debut, "The Sympathizer."

not to us, then to other people," he said in a video interview.

Real or imagined, the image and feeling stayed with him and shaped his new novel, "The Committed," a sequel to his Pulitzer Prize-winning debut, "The Sympathizer."

Like "The Sympathizer," "The Committed," being released this week by Grove Press, hinges on questions about individual and collective identity and memory, how wars are memorialized, whose war stories get told and what happens when abstract political ideologies are clumsily deployed in the real world. It is packed with gunfights, kidnappings, sex and drugs but delivered in dense prose that refers to obscure scholarly texts and name-checks philosophers like Sartre, Voltaire, de Beauvoir, Fanon and Rousseau.

"The Committed" opens with a scene that feels Homeric, as a group of refugees make a treacherous journey in the belly of a fishing boat. As a refugee — and as someone who often points out that he is a refugee, not an immigrant — NGUYEN, PAGE 2

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