

U.S. Should Not Erode Its Own Sanctions by Inviting Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee to APEC in San Francisco

Who is John Lee?

John Lee was appointed by the Chinese Communist Party as the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in July 2022. During the 2019-2020 pro-democracy movement, Lee supervised the violent police response. In 2020, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned Lee under provisions of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019 and the Hong Kong Autonomy Act of 2020, noting his role in “coercing, arresting, detaining, or imprisoning individuals under the authority of the National Security Law (NSL), as well as being involved in its development, adoption, and implementation.”ⁱ

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum is slated to be held in San Francisco in November. Hong Kong’s leader has traditionally been invited. Inviting Lee would make a mockery of the U.S. sanctions regime.

What has John Lee done?

Overseen Police Brutality and Abuse of State Power

- In 2019, as the Secretary for Security, Lee oversaw a violent police crackdown involving the use of water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and brutal beatings against mostly peaceful protesters.ⁱⁱ
- Presided over the arrest of an estimated 10,000 individuals in the wake of the 2019 protests.ⁱⁱⁱ

Used National Security Law to Override Hong Kong’s Legal System

- Lee has used the NSL to silence media, lawyers, scholars, and NGOs.
- There are more than 1500 political prisoners in Hong Kong,^{iv} around 250 pro-democracy activists and journalists have been arrested under the NSL, including the “Hong Kong 47” and 75-year-old Jimmy Lai.^v
- Lee ignored Hong Kong court rulings when he banned foreign lawyers from NSL cases, barring British barrister Tim Owen from defending Mr. Lai.^{vi}

Suppression of Free Speech and Embrace of Chinese ‘Counter-Terrorism’ Measures

- Lee banned the annual Tiananmen Square vigil in Hong Kong and arrested dozens of people for publicly commemorating the 1989 protests.^{vii}
- Lee backed the removal of politically sensitive books from Hong Kong public libraries, bookstores, and schools, including books related to the Tiananmen Square crackdown.^{viii}
- Lee endorsed China’s “counter-terrorism” measures on the Uyghur population in Xinjiang after a visit there and encouraged Hong Kong to follow suit.^{ix}

Eradication of Opposition

- At least 58 organizations, including unions, churches, media groups, and political parties, have disbanded since 2021, citing security concerns and harassment under NSL.^x
- Lee plans to eliminate most directly elected seats on local district councils and vet all incoming members to prevent democratic challenges.^{xi}
- Lee pledged to enact a new Hong Kong law to criminalize theft of state secrets and prohibit foreign organizations’ activities in Hong Kong.^{xii}

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- ⁱ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Leader of Hong Kong Security Bureau for Undermining Hong Kong's Autonomy," press release, July 9, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1088>.
- ⁱⁱ Hong Kong Free Press, "Hong Kong's John Lee chides reporter for referring to 2019 protests instead of 'the black violence'," May 3, 2023, <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/05/03/hong-kongs-john-lee-chides-reporter-for-referring-to-2019-protests-instead-of-the-black-violence/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "Memorandum on the Deferred Enforced Departure for Certain Hong Kong Residents." The White House, August 5, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/05/memorandum-on-the-deferred-enforced-departure-for-certain-hong-kong-residents/>.
- ^{iv} Hong Kong Democracy Council, "Hong Kong Political Prisoners", updated June 19, 2023, <https://www.hkdc.us/hong-kong-political-prisoners>.
- ^v "Tracking the Impact of Hong Kong's National Security Law," ChinaFile Asia Society. May 30, 2023. <https://www.chinafile.com/tracking-impact-of-hong-kongs-national-security-law>.
- ^{vi} Hong Kong Free Press, "Breaking: Hong Kong court rejects media tycoon Jimmy Lai's bid to challenge Nat. Security Committee decision," May 19, 2023, <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/05/19/breaking-hong-kong-court-rejects-media-tycoon-jimmy-lai-bid-to-challenge-nat-security-committee-decision/>.
- ^{vii} Associated Press, "China silences critics on eve of Tiananmen anniversary," June 3, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-tiananmen-anniversary-16fe986d4caffd4e76c54a6e879c205a>.
- ^{viii} Al Jazeera, "Tiananmen books disappear from Hong Kong library shelves," May 18, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/18/tiananmen-books-disappear-from-hong-kong-library-shelves>.
- ^{ix} Information Services Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "Appointments to Police Public Relations Branch," January 9, 2019, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201901/09/P2019010900583.htm>.
- ^x Hong Kong Free Press, "Timeline: 58 Hong Kong civil society groups disband following the onset of the security law," June 30, 2022, <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/06/30/explainer-over-50-groups-gone-in-11-months-how-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-forces-crumbled>.
- ^{xi} Associated Press, "China sets the stage for Hong Kong elections overhaul," March 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-democracy-electoral-overhaul-138fbe46d70593f22050ed81a24fce30>.
- ^{xii} Associated Press, "Hong Kong leader rejects calls to delay legislative elections," September 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/covid-health-asia-pacific-elections-hong-kong-50f934aadca5e73c3001ef147b9102e1>.