

Freedom fading fast in Hong Kong

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Hong Kong received sharp reminders this past week that it must continue to fight Beijing if it hopes to retain the freedoms enshrined in its Basic Law and the independence of its government agencies and judiciary. For years, civic groups have pointed to signs that Hong Kong's freedoms are eroding. This week, an attack on Hong Kong journalists in China proper was the latest reminder that the rights Hong Kong residents enjoy apply only within the territory.

Despite increasing self-censorship on sensitive issues since the handover in 1997, Hong Kong's media today still enjoy a level of freedom their Chinese counterparts have never tasted. Two incidents this week were grim signals that Chinese authorities consider that freedom a threat and that very different rules apply in China. Once they cross over to the mainland, Hong Kong media cannot expect to receive better treatment than China's cowed press corps.

On Sunday, a TVB reporter and his cameraman, along with a journalist from another Hong Kong station, were reportedly beaten by Urumqi police and threatened at gunpoint after being caught taping police using tear gas against protesters.

The following day, five Hong Kong reporters who were also covering the Urumqi protests were detained and harassed.

Media reaction in Hong Kong was quick. Dozens of reporters held a protest outside Beijing's liaison office to condemn the abuse and call for media freedoms in China proper.

These incidents are hardly the first indicator that Hong Kong journalists take big risks by reporting on sensitive subjects in China. Journalist Ching Cheong (鄭經) spent three years in prison after he was caught on the mainland collecting information for a report on late Chinese premier Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽). Ching, who was jailed on bogus charges of spying for Taiwan, was originally sentenced to five years in prison, but was released early, possibly in response to a relentless and high-profile campaign by concerned groups in Hong Kong and abroad.

Other incidents since then — including the harassment of Now Television journalists covering a dissident's trial last month — demonstrate that the abuse of Hong Kong reporters are not isolated incidents or "misunderstandings" as Chinese police have at times claimed.

On Friday, meanwhile, a ruling by a Hong Kong court reinforced concerns that the territory's judiciary and its government agencies are struggling to maintain independence in the face of fierce pressure from China.

The Court of Appeal of the High Court rejected an appeal by five Taiwanese who have been battling the Hong Kong Immigration Department in court for more than six years over an incident in February 2003: About 80 Taiwanese Falun Gong followers with valid visas were turned away at Hong Kong's immigration when they arrived to attend a conference.

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Had the court ruled in the complainants' favor, it would have been a clear message to Hong Kong authorities that they will be held accountable for arbitrary decisions — in this case, a decision that clearly violated the territory's freedom of religion.

Although the case may not be over, this latest defeat was disheartening and disturbing. It is an indication that Chinese authorities can expect Hong Kong agencies to make illegal decisions at their bidding with little or no repercussions.

If this experience emboldens China, Hong Kong residents may find that Beijing's meddling arm will have an ever wider reach into the territory.

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