

Hong Kong bans face masks under old law

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Demonstrators wear masks during a protest in the Central district of Hong Kong yesterday. Photo: Bloomberg

Hong Kong invoked emergency powers for the first time in more than half a century to ban face masks for protesters after months of unrest, prompting demonstrators to occupy downtown streets.

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) yesterday said the move was necessary to stem increased violence in recent weeks, including attacks by protesters using petrol bombs, corrosive liquids and other weapons.

The prohibition on face masks would deter violence and help police to enforce the law, she said, adding that the measure did not mean Hong Kong was under a state of emergency.

As Lam spoke, protesters began gathering in Hong Kong's Central district and occupying major boulevards.

Shops closed early in anticipation that demonstrations would grow violent, similar to clashes between police and protesters in the past few weeks.

"The violence is destroying Hong Kong," Lam told reporters, flanked by 16 members of her cabinet. "We must save the present Hong Kong and the future Hong Kong."

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Lam called the situation “fluid” and said the government might consider additional measures if the situation worsened.

“I don’t see how you could relate this to a step closer to authoritarianism,” Lam said in response to a question. “This is a responsible act to deal with an extremely difficult situation, which I hope the world has sympathy.”

The face mask has become a symbol of resistance among protesters who fear retribution if they are identified: China has applied pressure to businesses such as Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd () to fire employees who participate in demonstrations.

The Civil Human Rights Front, which has organized some of the largest protests in the past few months, called the mask ban “dictatorship rule” and said “unspeakable consequences will follow.”

“This is like opening a Pandora’s box — who knows what will come next after this ban?” said one man protesting in central Hong Kong, who only gave his surname Lau. “But the government should know that if it insists, and doesn’t listen to the people, we won’t give up and will keep the government accountable. We will continue our fight.”

The emergency law, first passed by the British government nearly a century ago to quell a seamen’s strike in Hong Kong’s harbor, was last used by the colonial administration to put down riots in 1967.

Denounced by protest leaders, it could give the government greater leeway to arrest citizens, censor publications, shut off communications networks and search premises without warrants, among other measures.

“Put simply, if there’s no escalation of violence, we don’t need to come out with any new measures, but if violence escalates, we need to maintain law and order in Hong Kong, we need to make sure that people can conduct their lives as usual,” Lam said.

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