

## International

# China moves to eliminate Hong Kong opposition

## Vetting legislation final nail in coffin of HK democracy movement

**BEIJING:** China moved Friday to grant itself veto powers over selecting Hong Kong's lawmakers, part of a campaign to eliminate dissent and ensure a "patriotic" government in the city following huge democracy rallies in 2019. Legislation to allow China's communist rulers to vet all election candidates in Hong Kong was introduced at the opening of the nation's rubber-stamp parliament in Beijing. It came a day after dozens of democracy campaigners in the financial hub—including former lawmakers—were jailed under a security law that was passed during last year's parliamentary session.

The new legislation includes a "qualification vetting system" that will promote "orderly political participation", parliamentary spokesman Wang Chen told reporters. China had committed to giving Hong Kong a degree of autonomy when it reverted from British colonial rule in 1997. But it began moving quickly to dismantle the financial hub's democratic pillars in response to huge and sometimes violent democracy rallies that paralyzed the city throughout 2019.

### Nail in coffin

The introduction of the vetting legislation—expected to be approved next week—was quickly interpreted as one of the final nails in the coffin of Hong Kong's democracy movement. "If the measures are passed, as I'm sure they will be, then the voice of the opposition will be effectively silenced," said Willie Lam, China analyst at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "This will effectively wipe out any remaining opposition."

The proposed rules drew swift international condemnation, with the United States and European Union saying that China was violating commitments it made before the 1997 handover. The move constitutes "a direct attack on Hong Kong's autonomy, Hong Kong's freedoms and the democratic processes," US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"If implemented, these measures would drastically undermine Hong Kong democratic institutions" and run counter to promises to work towards universal suffrage, he said. The European Union warned it could take additional steps against China in response. "The EU calls on the authorities in Beijing to carefully consider the political and economic implications of any decision to reform the electoral system of Hong Kong that would undermine fundamental freedoms, political pluralism and democratic principles," an EU spokesperson said.

### Economic power

The measure had been widely expected, with Beijing officials stating in the lead-up to the annual gathering of the National People's Congress that only "staunch patriots"—those loyal to the Communist Party—should be involved in governing Hong Kong. The Chinese congress session opened with an annual address by Premier Li Keqiang, who made no mention of Hong Kong besides Communist Party boilerplate about the city continuing to enjoy a "high degree of autonomy".

The annual week-long gathering of roughly 3,000 delegates, held in the cavernous Great Hall of the People in Beijing, is China's biggest political event of the year. The highly choreographed display is held to drive home the unquestioned domestic power of the Communist Party while updating China and the world on its economic, political, environment and foreign policy priorities. The event takes place with China outpacing other major economies after bringing the coronavirus pandemic, which first emerged on its soil, under control through draconian lockdowns and mass testing.

Li said the government was aiming for 2021 growth in the world's second-biggest economy of "above 6 percent". "In setting this target, we have taken into account the recovery of economic activity," Li told delegates in China's equivalent of a "state of the nation" address. China's economy



**BEIJING:** Wang Chen (center), vice chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC), delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. —AFP

expanded just 2.3 percent in coronavirus-stunted 2020, but Li noted the country was still "the world's only major economy to achieve growth" last year. Analysts believe China's economy could grow eight to nine percent this year.

China's finance ministry, meanwhile, revealed that the nation's military budget—the world's second largest after the United States—would increase 6.8 percent in 2021 to 1.36 trillion yuan (\$210 billion). But China's official budget number is widely believed to be lower than true spending. Li made

no direct mention of brittle ties with the United States, China's trading partner and geopolitical rival, with all eyes now on how the relationship may evolve under new US leader Joe Biden. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds a press conference on diplomatic affairs today on the sidelines of the NPC session. The gathering may consider a proposed revision to wildlife protection laws that would permanently ban eating most wildlife, amid the belief that the pandemic came from an animal host. —AFP

## The towering sea wall legacy of Japan's 2011 tsunami

**TARO, Japan:** The Japanese town of Taro had sea walls that were supposed to be able to survive almost anything the ocean could offer up, but the 2011 tsunami still brought utter destruction. A decade after the deadly waves unleashed by one of the most powerful earthquakes in recorded history, the lesson learned in many coastal towns was: build higher. That has left a legacy cast in concrete along hundreds of kilometers of Japan's northeastern coast—with a few notable exceptions where communities have rejected the imposing barriers. Before 2011, people in Taro assumed their walls would withstand just about everything. "Taro had built a perfect town to prevent disaster," 63-year-old local tour guide Kumiko Motoda told AFP.

The town adopted sea walls as early as 1934, after being engulfed by huge tsunamis in 1896 and 1933. Its 10-metre high barriers, running 2.4 kilometers (1.5 miles) in total, were known collectively as "The Great Wall" and came with 44 tsunami evacuation routes, equipped with solar panels to keep the lights on.

Roads were designed with clear views for evacuees, and residents were supposed to be able to get to safety in less than 10 minutes, Motoda explained.

But the 16-metre wave that arrived on March 11 made quick work of those best-laid plans, streaming over the walls and partially destroying them as it carried away homes and cars. Across Taro, 140 residents were killed and 41 remain missing. After the disaster, Japan's government asked coastal regions in the area to consider constructing or rebuilding protective walls, eventually setting aside 1.3 trillion yen (\$12 billion) in funds. In all, 430 kilometers of non-contiguous barriers will be built, with construction around 80 percent complete.

### 'Disaster-prone archipelago'

The structures have reshaped the coastal landscape, screening long sections of the sea from view. In Taro, the walls are now up to 14.7 meters high and run for over two kilometers. At their base, residents must crane their necks to even see the top. For a glimpse of the ocean, they must climb more than 30 steps up a staircase that looks like it leads directly to the sky. Experts say the barriers are worth it, offering two key protections: bouncing back the power of the waves, which reduces damage, and buying time for evacuation.

Even a few minutes can count for everything, said Tomoya Shibayama, a professor of civil and

the biggest challenges Modi has faced since coming to power in 2014. Singh, 32-year-old 'Major' in the 'army' of the Khalsa-followers of Sikhism who have undergone a sacred ceremony—oversees safety and security at the Singhu protest site. "This fight is for a just cause and anyone trying to harm the protesters will have to deal with us first," Singh, flanked by two spear-wielding men, told AFP. "We are here to defend our brothers and ready to die or kill. This fight is for peace, justice and dignity and we never compromise on these principles."

Following a tractor rally-turned-rampage in Delhi on January 26, authorities built a wall with huge blocks of cement, steel and barbed wire on the border of the Singhu protest site. On one side of this wall, are thousands of armed police and paramilitary forces, and on the other, dozens of barefoot Nihangs, armed to the teeth. At the protest camp, Nihangs tend to horses they rode from their Punjab homes hundreds of miles away, practice the Sikh martial art of "Gatka" and make a cannabis-laced sacramental drink. Most Sikhs carry daggers as religious symbols and wear turbans, but Nihangs stand out with their robes and weaponry, including knives, swords and spears.

and was a central figure in Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan that ended 50 years ago. He became the country's first leader but was assassinated during a military coup in 1975.

Last year, the prime minister unveiled plans for mass celebrations to mark the centenary birthday of Sheikh Mujib and 50 years since the founding of Bangladesh. Since then, hundreds of sculptures and murals of Sheikh Mujib have been appearing across the country. "People come from all over the country. Since the portrait became visible last month, every day we have got hundreds of visitors," Mohammad Asaduzzaman, a manager of National AgriCare, the company behind the giant portrait, told AFP.

The firm imported Chinese purple seeds to add to the local green variety and recruited fine arts students, hundreds of volunteers and rural workers to make the portrait. "He is our father of the nation. We got independence thanks to him," Shrimoti Mayrani Robidas, one of the workers, told AFP. —AFP



**MIYAKO, Japan:** In this picture a woman walks along an old sea wall as construction workers (behind) build a newer and higher one in the Taro district of Miyako, Iwate Prefecture. —AFP

environmental engineering at Waseda University. "There were many moments (in 2011) where these few minutes of time decided whether people were able to evacuate or were caught up by the tsunami," he told AFP. Newer designs incorporate wider bases and reinforced inner walls to stop the barriers being toppled and better absorb the force of multiple waves. Heights have been adjusted based on new predictions of the highest waves that could occur in once-in-a-century tsunamis. —AFP

### Piety and bravery

Nihangs have been revered by Sikhs for their piety and bravery since their order was founded in the 17th century by the last Sikh Guru to defend the religion, which began around 1500. They played an important role in Punjab for over a century, including defeating Mughals and Afghan kings. British colonialists dissolved the Sikh empire in the mid-19th century and the Nihangs were reduced to ceremonial roles. In recent weeks, they have been in the spotlight, after pictures and videos emerged of them brandishing swords and spears at policemen at Delhi's historic Red Fort during the January confrontation. In surreal scenes around the fort, Nihangs on horseback joined farmers on tractors and hoisted Sikh religious flags atop the rampart.

Days later, AFP witnessed a policeman wounded in a scuffle after he grabbed a Nihang's sword, as hundreds of people with alleged links to the government attacked farmers at the Singhu protest site. Nihangs were criticized for openly brandishing and using their weapons, which they are allowed to carry under the constitution as part of religious tradition. The warriors say they are simply fulfilling their obligations. —AFP



**BOGRA:** This aerial photograph shows a representation of the portrait of Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made with paddies in a field of Sherpur upazila in Bogra. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Lanka allows COVID burials

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka on Friday buried two Muslims who died of COVID-19, formally ending its policy of forced cremations that had sparked international outrage over the violation of Islamic funeral rites. Community leader Ali Zahir Moulana said a 55-year-old man and a 66-year-old woman were the first to be buried in coastal Oddamavadi, 300 kilometers east of Colombo. "Thank God," Moulana told AFP. "Finally, we have got burial rights." —AFP

#### Xi calls for 'popularizing' Mandarin

**BEIJING:** Authorities in Inner Mongolia must "solve ethnic problems" and push the use of the Mandarin language, Chinese President Xi Jinping has said, months after the region was rocked by protests over a new rule that would reduce the use of the local language. Tens of thousands took part in demonstrations and school boycotts last year after an edict mandated Mandarin replace Mongolian as the language of instruction, part of a nationwide drive to assimilate China's ethnic minorities into the majority Han culture. —AFP

#### Nepal signs peace deal with rebels

**KATHMANDU:** An outlawed Maoist group accused of staging several attacks signed a peace deal with Nepal's communist government on Friday, bringing an end to the country's only active insurgency. Jubilate Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli hailed the deal as "historic" at a gathering with the group's leader Netra Bikram Chand, who came out of hiding for the signing. Nepal has enjoyed relative peace since 2006, when a decade-long civil war ended and most rebels joined mainstream politics. But some hard-line guerrillas formed a new Communist Party of Nepal, accusing their former leaders of betraying their revolutionary cause. —AFP

#### Pakistan PM survives vote

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan survived a vote of confidence by the country's parliament yesterday, days after his party lost a key Senate seat to an opposition candidate. Ruling party and opposition activists clashed briefly outside the parliament ahead of the vote, with local TV channels showing a shoe being thrown at former interior minister Ahsan Iqbal. Khan secured 178 votes in the 340-seat National Assembly through an open ballot, boycotted by the main opposition parties, the Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan Peoples Party. —AFP

#### Taliban met US envoy in Doha

**DOHA:** Washington's special envoy to Afghanistan met with the Taliban in Qatar, the insurgents said yesterday, as efforts intensify to revive a peace process faced with mounting violence and a US troop withdrawal deadline. The envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, held talks earlier this week with Afghan leaders in Kabul, including President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, chair of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation which oversees the government's talks with the insurgents in Qatar. —AFP

## Giant portrait of Bangladesh's founder heightens anniversary fervor

**BOGRA, Bangladesh:** A giant portrait of Bangladesh's founding leader made from rice paddies has drawn hundreds of visitors as the country gears up to celebrate its 50th anniversary of independence this month. The 400-meter-long portrait of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—the father of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—was created from planting purple and green rice over the 13 hectares (33 acres) of land. Sheikh Mujib, as he is known, was born a century ago,