

Hong Kong: Thousands take to streets to protest new extradition laws

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A protester carries a placard reading "Against extradition law" during a march along a downtown street in Hong Kong Sunday, April 28, 2019. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Hong Kong: Thousands of people marched on Hong Kong's parliament on Sunday to demand the scrapping of proposed extradition rules that would allow people to be sent to mainland China for trial - a move which some fear puts the city's core freedoms at risk.

Opponents of the proposal fear further erosion of rights and legal protections in the free-wheeling financial hub - freedoms which were guaranteed under the city's handover from British colonial rule to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

Early estimates suggested several thousand people had joined the march along Hong Kong Island from Causeway Bay to the council in the Admiralty business district.

Veteran Hong Kong activist and former legislator Leung Kwok-hung said the government's move risked removing Hong Kongers' freedom from fear.

"Hong Kong people and visitors passing by Hong Kong will lose their right not to be extradited into mainland China," he said. "They would need to face an unjust legal system on the mainland."

Some younger marchers said they were worried about travelling to China after the move, which comes just as the government encourages young people to deepen ties with the mainland and promotes Hong Kong's links with southern China.

The peaceful marchers chanted demands for Hong Kong's Executive Carrie Lam to step down, saying she had "betrayed" Hong Kong. Some sported yellow umbrellas - the symbol of the Occupy civil disobedience movement that paralysed parts of Hong Kong for 11 weeks in 2014.

The proposed changes have sparked an unusually broad chorus of concern from international business elites to lawyers and rights groups and even some pro-establishment figures.

Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong who handed the city back to Chinese rule in 1997, on Saturday described the move "as an assault on Hong Kong's values, stability and security", government-funded broadcaster RTHK reported.

Chief Executive Lam and other government officials are standing fast by their proposals, saying they are vital to plug long-standing loopholes.

Under the changes, the Hong Kong leader would have the right to order the extradition of wanted offenders to China, Macau and Taiwan as well as other countries not covered by Hong Kong's existing extradition treaties.

As a safeguard such orders, to be issued case-by-case, could be challenged and appealed through the city's vaunted legal system.

Thousands of demonstrators march during a protest to demand authorities scrap a proposed extradition bill with China, in Hong Kong, China April 28, 2019. REUTERS/Tyrone Siu

Government officials have said no-one at risk of the death penalty or torture or facing a political charge could be sent from Hong Kong. Under pressure from local business groups, they earlier exempted nine commercial crimes from the new provisions.

The proposals could be passed into law later in the year, with the city's pro-democratic camp no longer holding enough seats to block the move.

The government has justified the swift introduction of the changes by saying they are needed so a young Hong Kong man suspected of murdering his girlfriend in Taiwan can be extradited to face charges there.

The government's assurances are not enough for Lam Wing-kee, a former Hong Kong political bookseller who said in 2016 he was abducted by mainland agents in the city.

Lam left Hong Kong for Taiwan last week, saying he feared being sent back to the mainland under the new laws and his experienced showed he could have no trust in China's legal system.

A group of 33 followers of Falun Gong, a religious sect banned in China, flew from Taiwan to Hong Kong on Saturday to join the march but were refused entry to Hong Kong, RTHK reported. Sunday's march comes amid renewed calls for deeper electoral reforms stalled five years ago after Occupy protests.

Four leaders of the movement were last week sentenced to jail terms ranging from eight to 16 months, part of a group of nine activists found guilty after a near month-long trial.

- Reuters