JAN–JUN 2022

Arrests Continue in Hong Kong

In the first half of 2022, national security continued to top the agenda of the Hong Kong Government. Local media outlet *Citizen News* shut in early January, mere days after the closure of *Stand News*, in fear of overstepping blurry red lines on national security. Citing similar concerns, Hong Kong's Foreign Correspondents' Club cancelled its annual Human Rights Press Awards, for the first time since 1996. Veteran journalist Allen Au, formerly of *Stand News*, was arrested in early April on charges of sedition. Later that month, radio host and opposition activist Tam Tak-chi was found guilty of the same charge and jailed for 40 months, marking the city's first sedition case since the British handover in 1997. In early May, Chan To-wai, a former standing committee member of the now-disbanded Hong Kong Alliance, which organised the city's annual Tiananmen vigil, was jailed for refusing to assist a national security investigation into the organisation. A court ruled that prosecutors could label members of the organisation as 'foreign agents' without having to reveal for whom they were accused of working. Standing committee members Chow Hang-tung, Tsui Hon-kwong, and Tang Ngok-kwan pleaded innocent and await trial in July, while Simon Leung Kam-wai finished his three-month jail sentence in April. Meanwhile, four trustees of the now-disbanded 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which helped pay the legal and medical fees of protesters who were arrested during the 2019 anti-government protests, were themselves arrested in May for allegedly 'colluding with foreign forces'. They include 90-year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, Cantopop star and activist Denise Ho, former lawmaker Margaret Ng, and academic Hui Po-keung. In May, the Hong Kong Election Committee selected John Lee, the former security secretary with three decades in law enforcement, to become the next Chief Executive, signalling an even greater focus on governance through national security. *AK*

(Sources: **Agence France-Presse 1**; **Agence France-Presse 2; BBC; *China Digital Times* 1**; ***China Digital Times 2***; ***Hong Kong Free Press 1***; ***Hong Kong Free Press 2***; **Reuters 1; Reuters 2;** ***South China Morning Post***; ***SupChina***; ***The New York Times***)

Xinjiang Still in the Spotlight as Human Rights Defenders Remain in Detention

In the first half of 2022, the international community maintained pressure on China over its human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In January, France's parliament passed an almost-unanimous resolution condemning the 'genocide' in Xinjiang, joining the Netherlands, Czech Republic, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Lithuania, and other governments in using the term 'genocide' to describe these human rights abuses. In February, the International Labour Organization expressed 'deep concern' over China's 'discriminatory' policies in Xinjiang and 'coercive measures' akin to forced labour. Researchers also revealed that the World Bank's private lending arm, the International Finance Corporation, has several significant investments in clients that actively participate in Beijing's campaign of repression against the Uyghurs. In May, UN Human Rights chief Michelle Bachelet conducted a long-awaited visit to Xinjiang that was widely criticised for reinforcing Chinese state propaganda and failing to adequately investigate human rights abuses. Meanwhile, the Chinese Government continued to round up human rights defenders, activists, and journalists. In January, lawyer Xie Yang was detained for inciting subver-

sion after publicly sympathising with a professor who questioned the death toll of the Nanjing Massacre. That month, Zhang Qing, wife of rights lawyer Guo Feixiong, died of cancer in the United States after a failed appeal to Beijing to let her detained husband visit her before her death. After being forcibly disappeared in September and placed under residential surveillance, #MeToo activist Huang Xueqin and labour activist Wang Jianbing were charged with inciting subversion in March. In April, the European Union revealed that An Dong, a Chinese national working for its diplomatic mission in Beijing, had been detained since September for 'picking quarrels'. In May, veteran journalist Luo Changping was given a seven-month jail sentence for defaming China's martyrs. On the bright side, Taiwanese activist Lee Ming-che, who was imprisoned for subversion in 2017, was finally released in April. *AK*

(Sources: **Agence France-Presse; Atlantic Council; *China Digital Times*; China Media Project; Chinese Human Rights Defenders; *Politico*; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; *South China Morning Post* 1; *South China Morning Post* 2; *SupChina* 1; *SupChina* 2; *The Wall Street Journal***)

US Department of Justice Closes Controversial China Initiative

In February, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) closed its China Initiative, a controversial Trump-era program from 2018 aimed at countering Chinese espionage in American businesses and universities. The program drew fierce criticism from activists, academics, and business leaders, who argued that it unfairly targeted professors of Chinese descent and scarred the research community. Matthew Olsen, head of the DOJ's National Security Division, claimed there was no evidence of racial prejudice in the DOJ's prosecutions, but a December 2021 analysis by *MIT Technology Review* found that almost 90 per cent of China Initiative defendants were of Chinese origin. Many critics also argued that the initiative helped fuel Sinophobia during a time of record anti-Asian violence in the United States. As a result, more than half a dozen top researchers of Chinese descent publicly stated their intention to move from their posts at American universities to China. Moreover, the DOJ failed to successfully prosecute numerous high-profile cases. While the DOJ has a conviction rate of 92 per cent for white-collar crimes, only one-quarter of those charged under the China Initiative were convicted and a significant number of cases were dropped, according to the MIT analysis. Even those who were found innocent, like MIT scientist Gang Chen, described having their reputations and lives ruined by years-long investigations and legal proceedings. The DOJ has replaced the China Initiative with a new program, called the 'Strategy for Countering Nation-State Threats', which focuses on a broader set of countries including Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China. However, many researchers are sceptical that the new initiative will be anything other than a change in name, as the DOJ has continued to investigate university professors of Chinese descent since the China Initiative's closure, and as academics find themselves under increasing scrutiny amid deteriorating Sino-American relations. *AK*

(Sources: **Associated Press; *China 21*; *China Digital Times*; *MIT Technology Review* 1; *MIT Technology Review* 2; *Nature*; *SupChina* 1; *SupChina* 2; The Brennan Center for Justice; *The New York Times*; *The New Yorker*; *The Wall Street Journal*; US Department of Justice; US–China Perception Monitor**)

Labour Issues in the Spotlight

In the first half of 2022, labour issues were once again in the spotlight in China, with health and safety at the forefront. In February, the deaths of a Bilibili content moderator and a young Bydance employee reignited debate about the '996' overwork culture in China. In March, 14 workers were killed in a coalmine collapse in Guizhou Province, bringing attention to the lingering safety problems in China's mining sector. Pandemic control measures in many Chinese cities put millions of

migrant workers' health, working conditions, and livelihoods at risk, especially food delivery drivers. Unemployment was another hotly debated topic in this period. In May, China's unemployment rate for workers aged 18 to 24 rose to 18.4 per cent—the highest rate since the country began tracking it in 2018. It was reported that several tech giants were resorting to mass layoffs: Didi Freight was reportedly laying off as much as 50 per cent of its workforce; Alibaba and Tencent were to cut more than 50,000 jobs; JD.com was trimming 10–15 per cent of its staff; and Meituan was set to lay off 20 per cent of workers in core business units—to mention just a few. In the face of such worrying numbers, the Chinese Government acted. In March, with a record 10.76 million university students set to graduate in the summer, the national authorities announced the creation of one million internship positions in the public sector for college graduates and unemployed youth. Also, Beijing pledged support for unemployed people, including allowances for migrant workers. Older workers and retirees were also at the centre of discussions. In March, several cities in China—including Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenzhen, Taizhou, Nanchang, and Jingzhou—set stricter age and hiring restrictions for migrant workers in construction, raising public concerns about the social protection of millions of older migrant workers in the country. The following month, China launched the country's first private pension scheme to tackle the strains of an ageing population. On the international front in April, China ratified two international treaties on forced labour amid criticism over the events unfolding in the Xinjiang region—a move that was met with widespread scepticism by human rights practitioners. *LL*

(Sources: ***Bloomberg* 1; *Bloomberg* 2; *Caixin*; *China Daily*; *China News Weekly*; *China Labour Bulletin* 1; *China Labour Bulletin* 2; *Financial Times*; *Forbes*; *Protocol*; *Rest of Word*; Reuters 1; Reuters 2; Reuters 3; Reuters 4; Reuters 5; Reuters 6; *Sixth Tone* 1; *Sixth Tone* 2; *South China Morning Post* 1; *South China Morning Post* 2; *South China Morning Post* 3; *South China Morning Post* 4; *SupChina* 1; *SupChina* 2; *SupChina* 3; *Technode* 1; *Technode* 2; *The Guardian*; *The New York Times*; *The Wall Street Journal*; *The Economist*; *Worker's Daily* 1; *Worker's Daily* 2; *Xinhua***)

Violence against Women Makes Waves

In late January, a video of a mother of eight chained by the neck in a doorless shack in Feng County, Jiangsu Province, sparked a huge public outcry in China. In February, while Chinese public opinion was outraged at the conflicting official statements, lack of action, and subsequent censorship in this case, state media celebrated Eileen Gu, the 18-year-old San Francisco–born skier who won two gold and a silver medal for China at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, as a symbol of a strong nation and women's empowerment. This provoked new, fierce debates about class and gender inequality in the country. In the same month, two women, known only by their online aliases, Quanmei and Wuyi, who had tried to visit the chained woman, were detained, and beaten by local police officers. After their release, Wuyi had her social media accounts blocked and was detained a second time in early March, igniting a #freeWuyi movement on Weibo. In March, another case of a woman being caged by her husband, in Shaanxi, spurred online discussions about human trafficking, domestic abuse, rural poverty, and the rights of women, which were promptly censored. In the same month, in response to these controversies, China's Ministry of Public Security launched a year-long campaign to stem the abduction and trafficking of women and children. All this occurred in the context of ongoing concerns over demographic decline. Government statistics released in March showed the number of marriage registrations hit a 36-year low in 2021, contributing to the country's rapidly declining fertility rate. In May, new figures from China's National Bureau of Statistics revealed the country's population is set to shrink for the first time since the Great Famine of 1959–61. In the same month, some Chinese youths used the 'We are the last generation' hashtag on Weibo to lash out at their disillusionment with life and the pressures they face to procreate and boost the

country's falling birthrate. In June, vicious attacks on women in Tangshan, Hebei Province, and Shanghai promoted outrage and reignited debate about predatory sexual behaviour and violence against women; yet China's officials and elites blamed gangsters rather than sexism and considered feminism a foreign plot. In more positive news, in June, a court in Jinan, Shandong Province, sentenced a former Alibaba manager to 18 months' jail for 'forcible indecency' in a landmark #MeToo case of the sexual assault of an employee during an alcohol-soaked business meal in the summer of 2021. *LL*

(Sources: ***Caixin Global***; ***China Digital Times* 1**; ***China Digital Times* 2**; ***China Digital Times* 3**; ***China Digital Times* 4**; ***HK01***; ***Insider***; **National Bureau of Statistics of China**; ***Quartz***; **Reuters**; ***Six Tone***; ***South China Morning Post***; ***SupChina* 1**; ***SupChina* 2**; ***The Conversation***; ***The Economist***; ***The Guardian***; ***The New York Times* 1**; ***The New York Times* 2**; ***The New York Times* 3**; ***The New York Times* 4**; ***The New York Times* 5**; ***The Washington Post***; ***Vice***)

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