

Hong Kong Advisory: 29 October 2019

Summary

The news agenda has shifted away from Hong Kong recently due to a wave of [international unrest](#), developments in Syria, the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and of course, the ongoing travails of the Brexit saga. But protests and arrests in the special administrative region have persisted. [Violent unrest](#) on Sunday, which included the detention of [one freelance journalist](#), marked the 21st consecutive weekend of protests. Hong Kong is expected to enter a [recession](#) when third quarter economic growth figures are released later this week, with tourism and business confidence both weakened by the unrest.

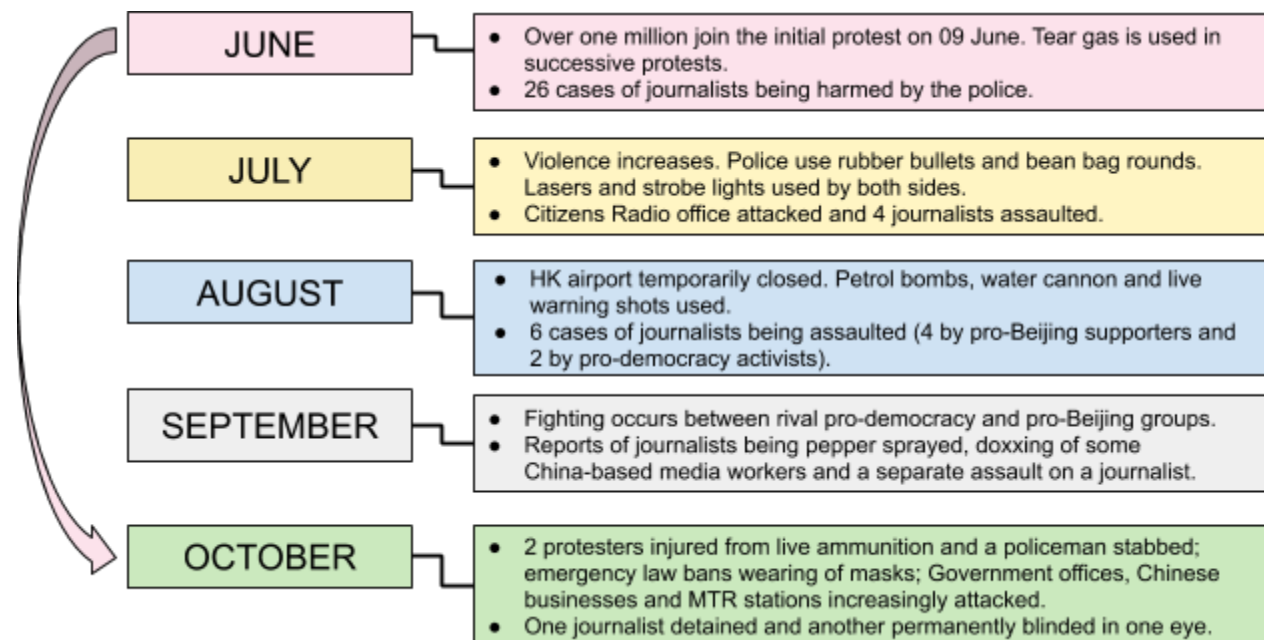
The official withdrawal on 23 October of the controversial extradition bill - the initial *raison d'être* behind the demonstrations - has not pacified the unrest. Protesters have indicated that even alleged plans to [replace](#) the unpopular chief executive, Carrie Lam, in March 2020 won't satisfy their [demands](#). With no political resolution in sight, we forecast that unrest will persist for the remainder of 2019 and into next year .

HP Risk Management has been supporting journalists covering events in Hong Kong over the last five months. This advisory provides a situational outlook for Hong Kong, and what it means for the ongoing safety of media workers reporting in the territory.

Situation Assessment

Journalists covering demonstrations in Hong Kong will continue to face threats associated with their work and coverage of the demonstrations. Given the scale of the protests, police to date have shown relative restraint; however, a number of journalists have already been injured and as the authorities and protesters become more polarised, levels of violence are expected to increase. Volumes of injuries, the severity of property damage and the more confrontational tactics of both protesters and police in the past two months, compared to the start of the demonstrations, already illustrate this worrying trend. Police efforts to restrict protesters, such as the widely flouted ban on the wearing of face masks after [emergency regulations ordinance](#) introduced on 4 October, will likely be expanded and provoke more of a backlash.

The situation is also not isolated to the police and protesters. Violent gangs of suspected Triad linked individuals have also undertaken well documented attacks on protesters and have been linked to the beating of protest organiser [Jimmy Sham](#) earlier this month.



The police have remained professional towards the international media for the most part, allowing foreign journalists to do their work without obstruction. However, local journalists have complained of being shoved and indiscriminately hit with pepper spray or tear gas by the police; and restricted from accessing certain protest sites. Pro-Beijing protesters have also been verbally hostile to both the domestic and foreign media. Some journalists have reported being surrounded by Beijing supporters who accuse them of having an agenda against the police and China, foreign conspirators or intent on damaging the local economy.

On the current trajectory, there is a considerable risk that Hong Kong will witness its first protest-related fatality. Any increased use of live ammunition will serve to polarise the two sides further and radicalise the opposition, while continued attacks on police and commercial property will serve as justification for a firmer stance from the police. [Curfews](#) could be introduced and MTR stations routinely closed in an attempt to control movement throughout the city and keep protesters away from key infrastructure. Any mass arrest of protesters for public order offences or restrictions on communications would also likely antagonise hardliners and ignite protests. Local council elections in Hong Kong on 24 November provide an obvious future flashpoint for confrontations, especially after activist [Joshua Wong](#) was disqualified from running for his district seat on 29 October.

Beijing's Position

Although China has refrained from sending extra police or military forces into Hong Kong so far, Beijing has applied other pressures on journalists and the wider international business community to make them reassess their reporting or public position on the Hong Kong situation. A [video](#) in August showing troops practicing riot control was considered to be a thinly veiled warning.

Some China-based correspondents covering events in Hong Kong have told us of additional scrutiny at border checkpoints, with digital devices inspected and information taken from them upon re-entry to China. Extra scrutiny and a generally more hostile reception in the country has been frequently reported, while some ethnically Chinese journalists have been publicly criticised and subjected to online abuse. Cases of [doxxing](#) have targeted journalists, as well as police, and has been linked to at least one physical attack on an Apple Daily journalist and his sister.

Chinese state authorities will likely make future reporting more difficult for journalists and organisations who have covered events in Hong Kong, especially if covering issues pertaining to political autonomy and the influence of Beijing. This may manifest itself in additional scrutiny upon entry/exit to the country, intimidation by security forces and/or border staff or unexplained delays or restrictions [obtaining visas](#). Cases include US academic Dan Garrett, who was recently [refused entry](#) to Hong Kong and journalist Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, who was [denied a Chinese visa](#) in June. There is a wider risk of [self-censorship](#) among some independent journalists or news organisations should pressures from Beijing intensify.

The Chinese government is also making international companies face difficult decisions balancing brand and reputation management with access to the lucrative Chinese market. Apple's decision to remove its [HKmap.live](#) application, and the fallout for the US [National Basketball Association \(NBA\)](#) following statements by Houston Rockets General Manager in support of the Hong Kong protests, will serve to remind corporate boardrooms of the risks of speaking publicly on the Hong Kong situation. It is feasible international media channels could face similar future pressures.

The economic impact of the unrest on Hong Kong has also been significant:

- The city's vital retail sector reported sales by value in August [declined 23%](#) year on year.
- Cathay Pacific, Cartier and Hong Kong Disneyland have all recorded a [drop in revenue](#).
- [Tourism has declined](#), particularly from China. During 'Golden Week' in early October, Chinese group tours were down a massive 86% and future hotel bookings have dropped by 40%.
- Big business deals have been [put on hold](#), with Temasek putting the sale of a 10% stake (valued at around \$3 billion) in Hong Kong retailer AS Watson.
- There is also the risk that residents will start [moving their capital](#) out of Hong Kong to places like Singapore.

Few economic sectors have escaped unharmed and this damage could eventually lend itself to Beijing's "[strategy of attrition](#)" that was employed during the Umbrella Protest Movement in 2014. Meanwhile, authorities are seeking to target, isolate and intimidate key protest organisers and gradually force them to give up the cause. Using both direct and indirect legal recourse, subtle means of intimidation, interference in personal and professional lives and the violent targeting of some protest organisers such as Jimmy Sham, the authorities appear intent on the gradual erosion of support and impetus behind the protests.

Safety Advice

- Journalists must wear a yellow vest marked with 'PRESS' in English and Cantonese on the back.
- Media credentials should be displayed and accessible at all times.
- Water cannon with colour dye has been used to identify protesters, which can cause serious injury if targeted at close range. Prepare for additional scrutiny from authorities and make sure you have accreditation to hand.
- The risk of injury from fireworks, molotov cocktails, rubber bullets, gas canisters and potentially live ammunition is real. Maintain situational awareness at all times and avoid getting in the firing line. A helmet offering protection is essential. Wear clothing and footwear that allows you to move swiftly and avoid flammable materials.
- Security forces will likely continue to use tear gas liberally. Those with respiratory health issues and asthma should particularly take necessary precautions:
 - A full-face respirator with a filter for organic gases is essential (3M 6002/6003 as an example)
 - Respirators can be bought in Hong Kong, though ideally they should be brought from home as they must be carefully fitted to the size and shape of your face.
 - Ensure you have a spare canister as they do need changing if used for prolonged periods.
 - It is worth noting that the anti-mask law extends to the wearing of respirators to protect against tear gas, though there is still [some debate](#) about whether this new law applies to journalists.
- When travelling across the border into mainland China take a clean phone rather than one used in Hong Kong. Chinese security officials are checking phones looking for photographs of the protests; and contacts with known protesters. Ensure all digital devices are secure with strong passwords and 2FA.
- Avoid working alone and be sensitive to your fixers/guides. Avoid putting them in situations which might cause issues for them with the authorities.
- Teams should work with someone who speaks Cantonese, as many protesters and police don't speak English.
- Use Back Watchers for additional safety due to the increasing level of violence being used by both sides.
- Tinted protective goggles are necessary to protect from laser pens & strobe lights. Ballistic goggles or other eye protection are also useful but as it's currently warm and wet in Hong Kong they must be well ventilated to avoid steaming up. Avoid wearing contact lenses.
- Avoid wearing black t-shirts which could identify wearers with the protesters, or white t-shirts which are associated with the Hong Kong triads (organised crime gangs).
- Always carry sufficient water, snacks and clothing in case of [kettling](#) or prolonged protests.
- Some protesters are wary of their photo being taken. Protesters can become aggressive if filmed committing vandalism or breaking the law, and may shout or try to block cameras.
- The police currently offer weekly, off-the-record briefings for all journalists and are holding daily press conferences; so for now the police appear to be taking the issue of media safety seriously enough.
- Ensure that you have a full battery on your mobile phone. Be aware that government workers posing as 'good samaritans' have been known to offer battery packs to help recharge phones, and then stolen information.
- Hong Kong airport, MTR stations and bus services have all previously been disrupted by the protests, so plan ahead and allow extra time for all journeys. Roads can be closed with little or no notice, so take a street map with you.



HP Risk Management works with a number of newsrooms and journalist associations, providing on-call risk assessment support, safety advice and training. For more information, please contact info@hpriskmanagement.com

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