

The 2022 Hong Kong Chief Executive Election

May 9, 2022

On May 8, 2022, the [Hong Kong Election Committee](#) (HKEC) elected John Lee Ka-chiu as the new chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). Lee was backed by 1,416 (96.9%) of the Committee's 1,461 members. While not without precedent, Lee's unopposed candidacy raised concerns among Hong Kong residents and foreign observers about the deterioration of Hong Kong's democracy, as well as the increasingly direct influence wielded by the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). In March 2021, China's National People's Congress (NPC) implemented a series of changes to Hong Kong's electoral system. [Some analysts](#) assess these changes as favoring pro-establishment candidates such as Lee. Lee's career in the HKSAR's security services, including his tenure as head of the Security Bureau at the height of recent tensions between the Hong Kong government and democracy proponents, [suggest](#) he is a Beijing loyalist who may do little to stop, and may outright facilitate, the further erosion of civil liberties.

Lee's Background and Platform

Lee spent the majority of his professional career in the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) before being [appointed](#) to the HKSAR's Security Bureau in 2012. Sources [suggest](#) Lee played a pivotal role in 2019 in the HKSAR government's push for a controversial extradition bill that would have created a formal extradition mechanism between Hong Kong and Mainland China for certain crimes. The bill, which the HKSAR ultimately retracted, set off a wave of protests that was met with increasing brutality from the HKPF. Following the imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) by the NPC on Hong Kong, Lee—as a member of the Committee for Safeguarding National Security of the HKSAR, a select government committee created by the NSL—faced criticism for his role in the law's implementation. (For more on the National Security Law, see CRS Report R46473, *China's National Security Law for Hong Kong: Issues for Congress*.) He served as chief secretary for administration, the HKSAR's second highest official, from June 2021 until his resignation in April 2022 to run for chief executive.

In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Treasury [sanctioned](#) Lee, along with 10 other individuals, pursuant to then-President Donald Trump's Executive Order on Hong Kong Normalization ([E.O. 13936](#)). In October 2020, the Department of State [identified](#) Lee as “materially contribut[ing] to the failure of the Government of China to meet its obligations under the Joint Declaration or Basic Law,” elaborating:

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“under his oversight, the Hong Kong Police have set up a dedicated unit to enforce the National Security Law, which has arrested protestors and activists.”

Per the PRC state-owned *Ta Kung Pao*, Lee’s [policy platform](#) focused on local issues such as housing, economic competitiveness, and opportunities for young people. His platform includes civil service reform aimed at “creating a culture of loyal civil servants compatible with the PRC’s constitution and Hong Kong’s Basic Law.” Lee has [said](#) “[u]niversal suffrage is too controversial and sensitive, and might give opposition forces a chance to achieve their political agendas.”

Reactions to the Election

Lee’s election has engendered mixed reactions. Activist group Stand with Hong Kong has [referred](#) to the election as a “sham,” adding that “[t]he installation of John Lee is dangerous, illegitimate and undemocratic.” One pro-democracy party has [expressed](#) concern that, “apart from the central government, there are no other local mechanisms or powers to monitor and act as checks and balances to John Lee’s administration.” Lee’s election was supported by the city’s largest (and pro-Beijing) political party, as well as the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce.

Some foreign governments have criticized the election. On May 9, [a statement](#) by G7 foreign ministers noted their “grave concern over the selection process for the Chief Executive in Hong Kong as part of a continued assault on political pluralism and fundamental freedoms.” In a [press release](#), European High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell stated the European Union “regrets this violation of democratic principles and political pluralism and sees this selection process as yet another step in the dismantling of the ‘one country, two systems’ principle.”

On May 8, the PRC Liaison Office in the HKSAR issued [a statement](#) congratulating Lee and referring to the election as “a step further in the implementation of the principle of ‘patriots administering Hong Kong’” and “highlighting the progressively superior nature of the new electoral system.” The Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the PRC’s State Council [heralded](#) the election as “yet another success” of the HKSAR’s new electoral system.

Issues for Congress

Congress has expressed concern about the erosion of civil liberties in the HKSAR. Lee’s pro-Beijing leanings suggest his administration may further erode civil liberties and democratic institutions in a manner inconsistent with the [Sino-British Joint Declaration](#) that facilitated the territory’s handover to the PRC. In response to the central government’s increasingly direct influence over the HKSAR, the Trump Administration issued [E.O. 13936](#), which determined that the city “is no longer sufficiently autonomous to justify differential treatment in relation to the People’s Republic of China,” and suspended U.S. treatment of Hong Kong as separate from the PRC.

Congress also has sought to address police brutality and political repression in the HKSAR, especially since the passing of the NSL. The 116th Congress passed three Hong Kong-related laws. The Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-76) and Hong Kong Autonomy Act (P.L. 116-149) require the President to impose sanctions on PRC and HKSAR officials implicated in undermining democracy and human rights in Hong Kong, while P.L. 116-77 prohibited the sale of U.S. riot control equipment to the HKPF. In the 117th Congress, language in versions of the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act (S. 1260) and the America COMPETES Act (H.R. 4521) would extend prohibitions on the export of equipment to the HKPF, appropriate funding for promotion of democracy, and require the executive branch to report on Hong Kong’s role in PRC trade and industrial policies. (For more information, see CRS In Focus IF12070, *China Primer: Hong Kong*.)

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