Opinion – Why Britain Should Back a Hong Kong Government-in-Exile

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/06/18/opinion-why-britain-should-back-a-hong-kong-government-in-exile/

KA HANG WONG, JUN 18 2025

On 30 June 2020, the Chinese government imposed a sweeping National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong, effectively ending the city's autonomy. The law, introduced after months of protests, severely curtailed freedoms guaranteed under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration—the international treaty that laid the groundwork for Hong Kong's post-handover governance. By arresting pro-democracy activists, disqualifying elected legislators, and redesigning the electoral system to allow only "patriots" to govern, Beijing violated its treaty commitments. In response, the UK launched the British National (Overseas) visa scheme in 2021, offering Hongkongers a pathway to settlement and citizenship. Over 163,000 people have already relocated to Britain, with as many as 5.4 million potentially eligible. While this measure offers an escape route, it leaves a deeper constitutional question unresolved: what becomes of Hong Kong' s right to democratic self-governance under the Joint Declaration?

A growing movement is emerging to address this gap. A group of exiled activists calling themselves the Hong Kong Parliament has recently held its first global election through a mobile voting app. The organisation behind the election, formed in Canada, positions itself as a nonpartisan initiative led by the Hong Kong diaspora. The project aims to represent Hongkongers forced into exile following China's crackdown. As former lawmaker-elect Baggio Leung explained to the South China Morning Post, the initiative was inspired by the Tibetan parliament-in-exile, which has operated from Dharamshala, India, since 1960 with land and recognition granted by the Indian government. Though largely symbolic at this stage, the election marks a bold step toward political continuity in exile. The Tibetan precedent is crucial. The Central Tibetan Administration, while not officially recognised as a sovereign government, nonetheless maintains a functioning cabinet, parliament, school system, and diplomatic presence abroad. For Hongkongers facing political persecution, this model offers a possible template for democratic continuity beyond the reach of totalitarianism.

But unlike the Tibetan case, the UK holds a unique responsibility as a signatory to the Sino-British Joint Declaration. If Hongkongers are now attempting to build an exiled democratic institution in response to China's breach of that treaty, then the UK's silence risks undermining the effort's legitimacy. Given the UK's history in hosting exiled governments, support from the UK would not only bolster the Parliament's credibility but also reaffirm Britain's own standing as a treaty-bound guarantor of Hong Kong's promised autonomy.

Yet the exiled parliament initiative currently exists only in cyberspace. Without territory, a government-in-exile lacks the institutional authority to issue identity documents, provide services, preserve culture, or build political legitimacy. For this reason, some within the diaspora, among them economic theorists and entrepreneurs, are now calling for a further step: securing land in the UK to establish a Hong Kong Crown Dependency or charter city. This idea, sometimes referred to as "Hong Kong 2.0", was popularised by economist Sam Bowman, who proposed creating a charter city in the UK governed by separate legal and regulatory institutions. Bowman's vision builds on Nobel laureate Paul Romer's theory of charter cities, which argues that governance—not geography—is the key to economic development. The success of the original Hong Kong, Romer claims, stemmed from its status as a jurisdiction governed by British non-interventionist economic policies, in contrast to the planned economy of mainland China.

Romer's theory, however, focuses largely on economics, overlooking the exceptional political conditions in which charter cities might arise. He draws on Hong Kong as a model, crediting its success to delegated governance. Romer's theory reflects China's narrative that it "allowed" British administration of Hong Kong while maintaining its claim over the territory. Yet the very example Romer relies on was only possible because of geopolitical contingency and contested sovereignty. Hong Kong's prosperity was not solely the product of institutional design but emerged from a fragile historical moment shaped by British colonial policy, China's strategic restraint, and enduring ambiguity over sovereignty.

Despite its formal status as a Crown colony, and later a British Dependent Territory, Deng famously promoted a "legal fiction", claiming Hong Kong was never a colony but merely "occupied". This narrative laid the groundwork for Beijing's revisionism today, including textbook changes that deny Hong Kong's colonial past. Since the 1997 handover to Chinese sovereignty, the city has experienced economic decline, while ideological control has become central to Beijing's playbook. Beijing's hegemony highlights the limits of Romer's apolitical framing, which treats institutional design as separate from questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and ideology. In Hong Kong's case, the success Romer admires was inseparable from the political ambiguity that enabled it—an ambiguity that has since been eliminated under totalitarian consolidation.

Today's BN(O) diaspora is not simply seeking opportunity, but fleeing ideological persecution. Their situation mirrors the exodus of Chinese refugees to British Hong Kong in the mid-twentieth century—people who escaped Communist rule in search of freedom, the rule of law, and the promise of democracy. Before the 1997 handover, Hong Kong had developed into a semi-democratic polity with a fully elected legislature. That democratic progress was abruptly reversed when the incoming Chinese regime replaced the legislature with an appointed "provisional" body, itself formed in exile from mainland China. Despite escalating repression, the political will among Hongkongers to elect a legitimate government remains alive and resurfaces now in the diaspora.

A charter city or Crown Dependency built for Hongkongers in the British Isles could therefore offer more than just economic space. It could restore a lost promise of democratic governance. Entrepreneur Ivan Ko, founder of the Victoria Harbor Group, has already partnered with Thames Freeport to develop a potential model for Hong Kong-style urban growth in the UK. Though currently focused on business collaboration, Ko's project highlights the appetite for a physical, autonomous space where Hongkongers can thrive. Crown Dependencies such as Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man enjoy high degrees of political autonomy while remaining under British sovereignty. A similar arrangement could serve symbolic and strategic functions, offering a form of political restitution for what many see as Britain's abdication of responsibility and providing an institutional base for a functioning government-in-exile.

The newly elected Hong Kong Parliament could evolve into such a government, potentially partnering with initiatives like the Victoria Harbor Group to lobby the British government for territorial autonomy. This would allow the exiled body not only to organise and advocate, but to govern. Formal recognition is not a prerequisite, as shown by the Tibetan case. What matters is political and material support from host governments. Britain, having opened its doors through the BN(O) pathway to British citizenship, now has an opportunity to go further. Supporting the creation of a functioning Hong Kong Crown Dependency, based on democratic principles and built on British soil, would affirm the UK's commitment to international law, liberal values, and its historical responsibilities to Hongkongers. It would also challenge China's contested claims of unbroken sovereignty over the city.

As the Tibetan experience shows, exile does not mean political extinction. For Hongkongers, it could mean rebirth. A UK-backed Crown Dependency or charter city would begin as a symbolic repudiation of totalitarianism. However, it needs not remain symbolic. With credible legal protections, financial infrastructure, and political support, it could attract real capital and talent, especially from those already disillusioned with Beijing's tightening grip. If Hong Kong's exiled citizens, family offices, and even tycoons redirect their capital into a free, globally integrated alternative, the result would be a shift not only in sentiment, but in power.

Such a project would not challenge Beijing through direct confrontation, but through exit, both the physical departure of people and the financial withdrawal of capital. It would erode the CCP's economic leverage by creating a parallel Hong Kong—one that upholds the rule of law, democratic values, and international trust. The slogan "Liberate Hong

Kong, Revolution of Our Times" may yet echo again not in the streets, but in the steady construction of freedom's sanctuary abroad. This is not merely a symbolic counterweight to the Belt and Road. It is a strategic alternative, positioned to preserve Hong Kong's legacy and help shape a post-CCP future.

About the author:

Ka Hang Wong is a PhD candidate at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).