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Hong Kong Fire: Dissent and Alarm under the National Security Law

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HO-YEUNG YIU, DEC 15 2025

Travelling via metro in the evening of 26th November, the blaze caught all passengers' eyes in disbelief near the Tai Po Market Station. The sheer scale of the fire had never been expected. After getting off the metro at the station, people who were strangers immediately formed a volunteer group. They rushed to the nearest supermarkets, buying living necessities and carrying them to Wang Fuk Court. It had been just a couple of hours since the fire broke out, but the residential area had been flooded with volunteers and neighbors arriving in trucks, cars, or even bicycles. Soon, online platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook pages became the headquarters of disaster relief (Hawkins 2025); alleys, streets, small businesses, churches, and government buildings were woven into a comprehensive network of supply stations. This spontaneous, grassroots response exemplifies how a non-partisan crisis can rapidly revive civic solidarity in a context of political repression, exposing the limits of the NSL in fully extinguishing communal agency and mutual aid networks that echo pre-2020 protest dynamics (Kobayashi, Song, and P. Chan 2021). This article combines the author's observations and the development of how a non-partisan outpouring of communal solidarity provoked the nerves of national security. It argues that it has exposed the fragility of the National Security Law (NSL)-imposed political dormancy, where the heavy repressive apparatus put in place since 2020 meets its challenge of public anger due to government failure.

Without a doubt, this was one of the biggest public mobilisation since the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in July 2020. When the fire was extinguished after 43 hours of burning, the people of Hong Kong turned their focus to investigating how the worst fire in a century broke out in Hong Kong (Luk 2025; Tse 2025a). Debunking the official claim that bamboo scaffolding was responsible to the devastating fire, local communities, especially residents of Wang Fuk Court, unleashed their fury towards the institutional failure: contractor's corner-cutting use of materials; fire alarm were allegedly unplugged for convenience; the suspicious conspiracy between district councilor, Peggy Wong, and the former owner cooperation committee; and the government's ineffective surveillance despite residents' formal complaints to the Hong Kong Labour Department about the risk of fire (Power, 2025; A. Li 2025; Y. Li 2025; Wu 2025b; Bloomberg News 2025). These revelations of systemic negligence do not merely fuel anger; they tear holes in the government's carefully maintained façade of competence and stability, showing that when failure is this blatant, the enforced political silence of the NSL era begins to crack, as universal safety grievances slip past the law's ideological filters (Zhu 2023). By centering "man-made" blame on ignored warnings, residents inadvertently highlight how NSL securitization diverts resources from regulatory oversight, making everyday hazards the new frontlines of dissent.

Unlike the fire alarm of Wang Fuk Court, the fire of fury among survivors and citizens of Hong Kong soon triggered the political alarm of Hong Kong officials. What began as an outpouring of communal solidarity rapidly morphed into the largest wave of public mobilisation since the NSL was imposed, and the authorities responded by treating grief, questions, and calls for accountability as threats to stability itself. On 29th November, three days after the fire broke out, Wen Wei Po published a special report, stating that "the National Security Department is highly concerned to prevent the black-clad rioters from hijacking the disaster relief activity... to carry out anti-PRC and pro-chaos conspiracies (Xiao 2025). This preemptive framing of aid efforts as potential subversion highlights the NSL's expansive securitization of everyday civic actions, revealing the regime's anxiety over non-ideological events that could erode its control and provoke unintended dissent (Chopra and Pils 2022; Karmazin 2023).

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This special report not only serves as an unofficial warning to potential dissenting voices but also as a response to actions of public mobilisation that were once considered habitual in Hong Kong. In the days following the blaze, a 24-year-old student from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Miles Kwan, launched an online petition outlining “four demands” – including advocacy of a comprehensive review of construction oversight regulation and investigation of potential corruption – which emphasises that the disaster was not a mere accident but a “man-made” tragedy rooted in systemic negligence (Hong Kong Democracy Council 2025a). One day after the launch of the online petition, national security police arrested Kwan for “seditious intention”, and the petition was promptly deleted from online platforms (Hong Kong Democracy Council 2025a). Along with Kwan, former district councilor Kenneth Cheung was detained the next day for similar advocacy (Leung 2025). These swift arrests demonstrate how the NSL conflates legitimate calls for accountability with sedition, thereby exposing the law’s fragility when faced with public demands that transcend partisan lines and directly confront governmental incompetence (Kobayashi, Song, and P. Chan 2021). When ordinary demands for safety and accountability sound almost identical to the old protest slogans, the regime has no language left except “sedition,” blurring the line between livelihood critique and political threat (Fu 2023; Lin and Fei 2023). In deleting petitions overnight, authorities only amplify the very fragility they seek to hide, as swift repression turns isolated voices into symbols of broader, ungovernable public outrage.

On the same day, authorities also intervened decisively on the network of local support, which was considered a revival of 2019’s mutual aid ethos. Volunteers were ordered to vacate the makeshift supply station at Kwong Fuk Estate and government buildings such as the Tung Cheong Street Sports Centre, on the grounds of restoring their public uses and alleged complaints of noise at night (TBS News Dig 2025). However, reports suggest underlying securitisation: pro-Beijing “care teams” threatened charges of “illegal assembly,” and national security police, including senior superintendent Steve Li Kwai-wah, visited sites to monitor for “black violence” infiltrators – code for perceived anti-government elements (Xiao 2025). This closure not only disrupted aid flows but symbolised NSL’s expansion, recasting organic solidarity as potential unrest and subordinating community resilience to state control. By dismantling these networks, the authorities inadvertently underscore the NSL’s inability to fully suppress organic civic responses, as such interventions risk amplifying public perceptions of overreach and further eroding trust in the post-2020 repressive framework: repressing empathy only deepens the crisis of confidence in a system that views neighbors helping neighbors as a security risk. (Baehr 2022).

After the closure of major supply stations and volunteer aid turned discreet, public mourning rituals became another flashpoint under NSL scrutiny. Memorials located at the Kwong Fuk Sitting-out Area drew thousands, with long queues snaking through parks, bridges, and to the river sidewalk, where people laid flowers, handwritten notes, and incense offerings (Khalil 2025). Vigils marked the “head-seven day” (頭七, tau4 cat1) on December 2, including international gatherings in Tokyo, London, and Taipei, while local condolence books were set up across 18 districts (Kwok et al. 2025). The persistence of these communal rituals amid heavy surveillance reveals how non-partisan expressions of grief can challenge the NSL’s chilling effect, transforming private loss into a subtle form of collective resistance against imposed political silence (M. Wang 2024). The realisation that the mutual-aid networks of 2019 can still be switched on in hours, and that the NSL toolbox has no real answer for genuine community resilience (Baehr 2022; Kwak 2024): from disaster relief, grieve to demands of accountability, the NSL could only extend its reach when community’s actions directly pointed to the government, while leaving public expressions of emotions into speculations and often whimsical assumptions.

Police maintained a heavy presence at memorial sites, monitoring crowds in terms of public order and potential dissident voices: pavilions stacked by handwritten notes have been cleared out on a daily basis. Police indiscriminately removed all messages – whether mourning or expressions of anger – echoing NSL’s broader chilling effect (Rahn 2025; Pearson 2025). This securitised mourning – where empathy risks being labeled “incitement” – highlights how the law extends to regulate even private expressions of loss, transforming communal healing into a policed performance. Since day one of mourning, the author’s observation has it that police presence intensifies daily: sentinel stations extended from the vicinities of memorial sites into subways, metro stations, and bridges. Unlike 2019, police presence does not provoke public sentiment or physical conflicts but instead serves purely to maintain public order and surveillance to prevent possible demonstrations. This shows the police forces and the NSL have a clear division of labor: police forces maintain public order and become the watcher, while the NSL’s chilling effect has taken over the role of suppression as we have seen in the 2019 Movement – a form of “controlocracy” that

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Stein Ringen (2016, 138) has prophesied – that it controls very strictly what is now allowed, using presence over dictations to be more effective than simple use of brute force.

However, this “controlocracy” in Hong Kong through division of labor between NSL and police forces has left a grey zone where citizens expressed dissent and advocacy for accountability more discreetly and cryptically. Author’s observation has it that, citizens queueing up to convey condolences were in complete silence with flowers in their hands, projecting their eyesight to the once-populated ruins of Wang Fuk Court, while still leaving anonymous handwritten notes such as “man-made tragedy” and “unjust system” in pavilions (Melimopoulos 2025; Tse 2025b; Y. Wang 2025). In the silent queues and cleared-away notes we see the quiet defiance that the NSL most dreads: mourning that refuses to stay purely private, grief that keeps slipping into accusation, turning even empathy into a subtle act of resistance (Hou and Peng 2023; M. Wang 2024). This policing of grief not only stifles healing but also exposes the NSL’s overextension, as it struggles to contain universal human responses that inadvertently highlight the regime’s governance failures and provoke broader societal reflection, turning pavilions into unintended archives of quiet fury (Zhu 2023).

In a parallel escalation of interference and discourse control, a planned press conference by civic groups and community figures who intended to discuss repair policy regulations and safety lapses exposed by the tragedy in Tai Po was cancelled abruptly when public mourning was at its apex. National security police approached and “talked to” solicitor Bruce Liu, one of the organisers, who was subsequently taken away for questioning (Hong Kong Democracy Council 2025b). The press conference that was aimed at addressing systemic issues like building maintenance, corruption, and government oversight failures was thereby framed as a potential security risk in terms of sedition by the National Security Department. Such cancellations illustrate the NSL’s role in preempting critical discourse, yet they also reveal its vulnerability when public anger over tangible failures like safety oversights challenges the narrative of unassailable stability (Chopra and Pils 2022).

With the number of casualties not being confirmed (156 deaths as of 4 p.m., 2nd December), and the cauldron of public fury continues to blaze, the public movement of disaster relief is gradually turning from a self-motivating mutual support among the community into a political livelihood issue beyond the political spectrum of “yellow” or “blue.” Terminologies used to label, distract, and diverge dissent voices since the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019 are no longer suitable to the current situation, where livelihood issues become a conduit of crisis of confidence and the slippery slope of political dissent. Even pro-Beijing activist Anna Chan Ching-sum (2025) was anguished by the Wen Wei Po’s report, questioning whether “anyone wearing a black mask and putting up a tent must be a remnant of the 2019 black-riot thugs or a yellow-ribbon supporter?” As a once-to-be “radical” representative of the pro-government faction, Chan’s dissent exposed the fissure from within: a disagreement and rejection of faction-framing rhetoric, while pointing fingers directly to the government’s incompetence, turning “peace and stability,” which once to was a pro-government vocabulary, into a weapon of criticism across factions and “colors.” In a situation where fire hazard is a quintessential public safety crisis, and the government’s inability to offer regulatory oversight renders traditional NSL tactics of labeling and separation ineffective. Unlike ideologically charged protests such as the Anti-ELAB movement, the Tai Po fire’s universal impact on housing safety, emergency response, and the government’s favoritism of discourse control affects all people of Hong Kong indiscriminately. This, in turn, exposes the regime’s inability to deflect blame through partisan framing and divisive rhetoric. The transcendence of traditional divides in this crisis underscores the fragility of NSL-enforced dormancy, as livelihood-based dissent proves harder to partisanise and suppress, potentially signaling a new phase of resistance rooted in everyday governance failures (Hou and Peng 2023).

In response to the changing reality and the challenges of public anger, both national security and public discourse invent new political vocabularies in Hong Kong. In response to the growing calls for accountability, the National Security Department and pro-Beijing press have coined or advertised the term “[?]” (“using disaster to disrupt Hong Kong”), portraying any criticism of government handling as orchestrated attempts to sabotage and undermine stability, thereby justifying arrests under sedition clauses (Cheng and Yu 2025). To avoid the allegations, the people of Hong Kong, learning from netizens in mainland China, make use of euphemistic vocabularies, coded or neutral languages to avoid surveillance. This renavigation of the NSL’s red lines, while still voicing discontent, is a linguistic evolution that echoes the self-censorship seen in post-2019 discourse, turning the invention of vocabularies from

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passive adaptation to a more proactive expression of dissatisfaction in everyday crises. This adaptive linguistic shift not only sustains dissent under repression but also exposes the NSL’s incomplete dominance over public expression, as citizens innovate ways to articulate grievances that challenge the regime’s control narrative (Hou and Peng 2023). The birth of “[?]” and the instant turn to coded language among ordinary citizens show both sides adapting at once — the state inventing new crimes, the people inventing new ways to speak truth — a linguistic arms race that proves the NSL has not managed to silence dissent, only to force it underground and make it sharper.

While the reinvigoration of civic consciousness after the dormancy caused by NSL is seemingly unquenchable, there is a potential concern about whether the government of Hong Kong and the National Security Department would escalate the levels of oppression as time passes by. John Lee, the current Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR, had shown his no-mercy, non-negotiable, heavy-handed tactics when he was the Secretary of Security during the Anti-ELAB Movement. With NSL and legislation of Article 23, the government of Hong Kong had even prepared its equipped arsenal against public dissent. On the other hand, no obvious signs are signaling that the public sentiment would fade in a short period of time. The collision between advocacy of truth and accountability by the public and morbidly fashioned pursuit of public control by the Hong Kong government would seemingly result in yet another political crisis. As of 9th December, 2025, the number of casualties has risen to 160 confirmed deaths (Wu 2025a). Amid this sorrow, as the author predicted, the measure of suppression in Hong Kong intensifies. Predominant netizens, like activist Ellie Yuen, were detained on 3rd December for “seditious” social media posts questioning regulatory lapses, with her social media account suspended. Data journalist Hailey Cheng faced police interrogation and a forced site takedown. Even Anna Chan, possibly under pressure from her faction, deletes all her posts since 2023. These silencing echoes, if not strengthening the heavy-handed NSL grasp, continue to erode Hong Kong’s civic fabric. Although the arsenal of public control might prevent another massive-scale protest similar to the Anti-ELAB Movement, the accumulation of dissatisfaction due to governance failure might ignite another blaze in Hong Kong. John Lee’s arsenal may prevent another million-person march, but every fresh arrest for mourning or questioning only adds more fuel to the slow-burning resentment. The political dormancy which has been imposed since 2020 looks increasingly brittle: one undeniable governance failure is all it takes for the embers of civic consciousness to flare up again.

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About the author:

Ho-yeung Yiu is a PhD candidate at the University of Technology Sydney. His thesis examines the role of space,

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place, and memory in Hong Kong's 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, exploring how spatial practices shaped narratives of identity and belonging under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. He is currently based in Hong Kong conducting research.