



Hong Kong — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Hong Kong, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

08/29/1842 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom]: The Qin dynasty brought the Hong Kong area under Chinese rule in 214 BCE, following their conquest of the indigenous Baiyue people. After the Qin dynasty collapsed, the region became part of the Nanyue kingdom, a precursor to Vietnam, until it was recaptured by China during the Han conquest. During the Mongol conquest in the 13th century, the Southern Song court briefly resided in modern-day Kowloon City before its ultimate defeat in the 1279 Battle of Yamen by the Yuan Dynasty. By the end of the Yuan dynasty, seven prominent families had settled in the area, with migration continuing during the Ming dynasty. In 1839, the Daoguang Emperor refused to legalize and tax opium, leading to the First Opium War after imperial commissioner Lin Zexu destroyed opium stockpiles and halted foreign trade. The Qing surrendered Hong Kong Island to Britain in the Convention of Chuenpi, but dissatisfaction led to further hostilities until the formal cession of Hong Kong Island to the United Kingdom in the 1842 Treaty of Nanking.¹ V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as ambiguous until 1931 and as somewhat present from 1932 onward. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

12/25/1941 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom Liberal Democracy]/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]: On this date, the Imperial Japanese occupation of Hong Kong commenced, when Sir Mark Young, the Governor of Hong Kong, capitulated the British Crown colony to the Empire of Japan. This surrender followed 18 days of intense combat against Japanese invading forces. Lasting for three years and eight months, the occupation persisted until Japan's surrender at the conclusion of World War II.² Moreover, political liberties are indicated with an ambiguous level for this period according to V-Dem's PCLI. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

08/14/1945 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Japan, Constitutional Monarchy]/Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom Liberal Democracy]: On this date, following Japan's announcement of unconditional surrender, the British assembled a naval task force destined for Hong Kong. Rear-Admiral Cecil Harcourt declared a military administration, appointing himself as its leader, on 09/01. Upon his reinstatement as governor in May 1946, Young initiated political reform, referred to as the Young Plan, aiming to counter the Chinese government's efforts to reclaim Hong Kong by granting local residents a greater role in the territory through expanded political representation.³ However, due to opposition from established elites and concerns about the rise of communism in China, this plan never got implemented. The terms outlined in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration established the conditions for the transfer of Hong Kong, with China consenting to uphold the existing governmental and economic frameworks under the "one country, two systems" principle for a span of 50 years. According to FH, for the years 1972 to 1978, the country is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. As classified by FH for the rest of the analysed regime period, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. Besides, V-Dem's PCLI increased into a range which we interpret as political liberties were somewhat present until 1979 and as present from 1980 onward. Until 1985, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted

by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. From 1986 to 1991, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. From 1992 onwards, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

07/01/1997 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of United Kingdom, Liberal Democracy]/Start Non-Electoral Transitional Regime [semi-sovereign, external affairs under China, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date, the transfer of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China occurred at midnight. This marked the conclusion of 156 years of British governance in the territory. The transfer marks the entry into force of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Therefore, we code the regime change event as a negotiated transition. Hong Kong was designated as a special administrative region (SAR) of China for a duration of 50 years, allowing it to maintain distinct economic and governmental structures separate from those of mainland China during this period.⁴ The Legislative Council established by Patten, with plans for partial universal suffrage, was replaced by an entirely unelected provisional legislature by the People's Republic of China (PRC).⁵ The Provisional Legislative Council (PLC) served as Hong Kong's interim legislature from 1997 to 1998. Initially founded in Guangzhou and later relocated to Shenzhen in 1996 (with offices in Hong Kong), it moved to Hong Kong upon the handover to temporarily replace the Legislative Council.⁶ As classified by FH for 1997, the country scores between 9 and 10 as not free, which we interpret as rather not free. Per FH's scoring for 1998, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. V-Dem's PCLI indicates that political liberties were present. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate.

05/24/1998 End Non-Electoral Transitional Regime [semi-sovereign, external affairs under China, Communist Ideocracy]/Start Electoral Hybrid Regime [semi-sovereign, external affairs under China, Communist Ideocracy]: On this date, the 1998 Hong Kong Legislative Council election took place, which was the first since the establishment of the HKSAR in 1997. It replaced the Beijing-controlled Provisional Legislative Council (PLC), which was boycotted by the pro-democracy camp. The election returned 20 members from directly elected geographical constituencies, 10 from the Election Committee constituency, and 30 from functional constituencies, with 10 uncontested. The pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) capitalized on Beijing's proportional representation system, gaining more seats than the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party secured 13 seats, becoming the largest party, while the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood also won seats. The Beijing-controlled PLC lost all its seats.⁷ Hong Kong operates under a hybrid regime that does not fully represent its population. Members of the Legislative Council elected by functional constituencies, comprising professional and special interest groups, are answerable to these limited corporate electorates rather than the broader public. This electoral system has ensured a pro-establishment majority in the legislature since sovereignty was transferred. Similarly, the chief executive is chosen by establishment politicians and corporate members of the Election Committee, rather than through direct election. While universal suffrage for the chief executive and all Legislative Council elections are stipulated goals of Basic Law Articles 45 and 68, the legislature is only partially directly elected, and the executive continues to be nominated by an unrepresentative body. Calls for direct elections for these positions have been repeatedly made to the government.⁸ The pan-democratic camp proposed a referendum in 2004 to gauge support for universal suffrage, but the idea faced resistance from the government and Beijing officials, citing concerns about breaching the Basic Law. In 2005 the government proposed a "district council model" for electing the chief executive and legislature, facing criticism from pan-democrats for not fully embracing universal suffrage. Pan-democrats proposed their own blueprint for political reform in 2007, advocating for equal and universal suffrage, but faced challenges in gaining support. Despite efforts for

electoral reform, progress has been slow, with mainland officials emphasizing other priorities over democracy in Hong Kong. Various protests and controversies, including the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 extradition bill protests, highlighted ongoing tensions and concerns about Hong Kong's political future. V-Dem's CEI scores the elections as clean from 1998 to 2015. For the following six years the scores decreased to somewhat clean. The overall election conditions are classified as free and fair until 2015 and switched then to a somewhat level (V-Dem EF&FI). Per FH's scoring for 1998-2003, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. As classified by FH for 2004-2018, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. According to FH, for the years 2019 and 2020, the country is partly free with a score of 8, which we interpret as rather not free. According to FH, for the rest of the regime period under consideration, a score between 9 and 10 makes the country not free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather not free. Besides, according to V-Dem's PCLI political liberties were fully present until 2013, then decreased to somewhat present until 2018. From 2019 to 2020 political liberties were acknowledged to be ambiguous. V-Dem's PCLI classifies the political liberties as not really present since 2021. Until 2017, For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. For the year 2018, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. For 2019, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. For 2020, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. For 2021, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

03/11/2021 End Electoral Hybrid Regime/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date, the National People's Congress passed a decision to overhaul Hong Kong's electoral system, seen as further limiting democratic freedoms and increasing Beijing's control over the region. We code this regime change event as a strategic autocratic restructuring, recognizing Beijing's de facto governmental power over Hong Kong. Debate continues about Hong Kong's political future post-2047.⁹ While the quantitative indicators point clearly into the direction of an electoral hybrid regime in the regime period until 03/11/2021 it is according to our qualitative observations afterwards an electoral autocracy. We classify it as an electoral autocracy since the competition was severely restricted. Even before the 2021 reforms, Hong Kong experienced significant crackdowns on pro-democracy activists and movements. Notable incidents include the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 extradition bill protests, which were met with heavy-handed responses from authorities, curbing political dissent and activism. From the outset, Beijing maintained substantial influence over Hong Kong's political affairs. The establishment of the Provisional Legislative Council (PLC) in 1997, bypassing fully democratic procedures, set a precedent for external control over Hong Kong's legislative processes. Media outlets critical of the government or pro-democracy movements often faced pressure, censorship, or shutdowns. This environment limited free expression and hampered the ability of opposition voices to gain traction and influence public opinion. Since 2022, not real electoral cleanliness is achieved according to V-Dem's CEI. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates the overall election conditions as not free and fair since 2022. LIED does not treat Hong Kong in its dataset. From 03/11/2021 onwards Hong Kong is a clear case of an electoral autocracy. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. As classified by FH for this regime period, the country receives a score of 10 and is interpreted as partly free, which corresponds to our interpretation of rather not free.

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong#History

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_occupation_of_Hong_Kong

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Hong_Kong#Restoration_of_British_rule

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handover_of_Hong_Kong

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_in_Hong_Kong#Post-1997

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provisional_Legislative_Council

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1998_Hong_Kong_legislative_election

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong#Political_reforms_and_sociopolitical_issues

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_in_Hong_Kong#Post-1997;
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Hong_Kong_electoral_changes