



14 November 2024

## Roundtable on Transnational Repression in the UK: lived experience and recommendations from Hong Kong diaspora community groups

### A Summary Report

#### Introduction

In September 2024, Amnesty International UK Section, Hong Kong Democracy Council and The Rights Practice jointly hosted a closed-door roundtable on transnational repression affecting the Hong Kong diaspora community in the United Kingdom (UK). The event brought together **30 participants from over 20 organisations**, including civil society actors of Hong Kong diaspora groups, human rights organisations, media workers, scholars and activists, to share their observations, lived experiences and policy recommendations. The event was held under the Chatham House Rule, and therefore contributions were anonymised (all pronouns of he/ she will be replaced by they).

Views and recommendations reported here were not necessarily shared and agreed by all participants. They also may not represent the views of Amnesty International UK Section, Hong Kong Democracy Council and The Rights Practice that co-host this event, which aim at platforming and channelling voices of UK-based Hong Kong communities as facilitators.

#### Transnational Repression

The UK government considers transnational repression as a form of “state threats” and organises its preventive and reactive responses through a national security lens. In November 2022, the UK government established the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which was meant to work across government and with the Parliament, intelligence agencies, local authorities and the private sector to review the UK’s approach to foreign interference in electoral processes in public office, political parties and universities, as well as transnational repression in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Tom Tugendhat, the former Minister for Security, reassured the parliament the National Security Act 2023 “includes measures to tackle foreign interference, including transnational repression”.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, no clear working definition by the UK government on what constitutes “transnational repression” that is comprehensive enough to capture its varying forms and threats levels. On the other hand, civil society groups have developed their organisational definitions of transnational repression based on the different contexts and geographical focuses of their work. Most of these definitions combine means of repression (e.g., assassination, harassment or intimidation) with targeted individuals (e.g., dissidents living in a foreign country) and purpose (e.g., to silence, deter and coerce).

For the sake of this roundtable discussion and the writing of this summary report, hereby we adopt and combine the definitions of “transnational repression” by the co-organisers of this

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<sup>1</sup> Home Office, Cabinet Office and The Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat MBE VR MP, “Ministerial Taskforce meets to tackle state threats to UK democracy”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ministerial-taskforce-meets-to-tackle-state-threats-to-uk-democracy>

<sup>2</sup> Hansard, “Transnational Repression by Hostile States” Volume 746: debated on Monday 26 February 2024, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-02-26/debates/AF337113-BAEF-4757-B538-EB3376936192/TransnationalRepressionByHostileStates>



roundtable: Amnesty International UK Section<sup>3</sup>, Hong Kong Democracy Council<sup>4</sup> and The Rights Practice<sup>5</sup>, referring transnational repression to the “acts of violence, coercion, intimidation or suppression of the exercise of lawful rights, by a government or its agents, to silence, control, deter and harass dissent and criticism by human rights defenders, journalists, academics, opposition activists and others, who live in another country”. Although transnational repression is a global human rights issue affecting individuals of diverse nationalities, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, this roundtable focused the discussion on the impact of transnational repression by Hong Kong or Chinese authorities targeting Hong Kong diaspora residing in the UK.

It should be noted that all observations and lived experiences shared during the roundtable were anecdotal, and some of the threats described may not amount to transnational repression under a strict definition. It is especially difficult for individuals to identify and prove whether certain harassment and surveillance are perpetuated or endorsed by a government and its agents without a thorough investigation process. We should also acknowledge that although not all individuals and groups are subject to the direct harm of transnational repression, the chilling effect it creates is disproportionate and far-reaching and can impact the entire diaspora community, as it fuels self-censorship, mistrust, passiveness and a strong sense of insecurity.

## **Part 1: Lived experience by UK Hong Kong diaspora community groups**

### ***Major observations***

- **Harassment of Hong Kong community events and protests**

Participants providing community service and emergency support for Hongkongers and asylum seekers – including immigration advice, helpline and community integration work – have faced threats, harassment and distressing pranks. For example, a helpline received suspicious phone calls from Hong Kong, several times a day, later found to be from a number associated with the Hong Kong police. Another participant shared that their organisation, which hosts cultural and community events for Hongkongers, occasionally receives suspicious sign-ups with contact details tied to Hong Kong police or the national security department reporting hotline. Thorough vetting by the organisers is therefore required to prevent sharing event details with the Hong Kong authorities.

A few participants who organised community-based cultural activities recalled incidents of verbal harassment from a group of Chinese individuals. In one case, an organiser displayed the renowned “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times” protest flag (光時旗). The Chinese individuals then complained to the person in charge of the venue, requesting its removal. At another event promoting Hong Kong music and culture, a group of Chinese individuals approached and yelled, “There is no Hong Kong culture”. While no physical assault occurred, the organisers felt emotionally disturbed.

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<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, “On my campus, I am afraid - China’s targeting of overseas students stifles rights”, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/8006/2024/en/>

<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong Democracy and Students for a Free Tibet, “Exporting Repression: Attacks on Protesters During Xi Jinping’s Visit to San Francisco in November 2023”, <https://ccpexportingrepression.com>

<sup>5</sup> The Rights Practice and FairSquare, “Addressing the challenge of transnational human rights violations in the UK”, <https://www.rights-practice.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=4b44e89e-b8ad-42a6-8f01-1e65a77640ac>



- **Local political sentiment weaponised to intimidate the Hong Kong diaspora community**

A participant recently organised a UK protest for the 2019 Hong Kong protests' anniversary. After sharing details on Facebook, several comments warned people against attending, claiming the protest had been "targeted by far-right groups". The participant chose not to cancel the protest but informed local police as a precaution. Fortunately, no incidents occurred, but they suspected that the Chinese Communist Party and its sympathisers might manipulate local issues, such as anti-immigrant sentiment, to intimidate the Hong Kong diaspora.

During the racist violence that swept through multiple UK cities in August, a participant reported that the address of emergency accommodation for Hong Kong asylum seekers was shared online by far-right groups. They were unsure how or by whom it was leaked. Another participant noted that a local Hong Kong community centre was accused on X of "hiding illegal immigrants." They reported this to the police, who investigated and linked it to far-right groups.

- **Digital doxing and trolling targeting Hong Kong activists**

It is not uncommon for participants who have either organised or participated in Hong Kong-related protests to be photographed without consent by hostile individuals, who then share the images widely on Chinese social media platforms, including Xiaohongshu (小紅書) and WeChat. One participant working for a human rights organisation shared that, to protect their personal identity and work affiliation, they avoid following their colleagues on social media and refrain from taking any pictures at the office.

At least two participants reported receiving extensive trolling on social media, including death threats. Messages accused them or their organisations of violating Hong Kong's national security laws and claimed they would be reported to Hong Kong police.

- **Beneficiaries in Hong Kong punished for receiving overseas financial support**

Some UK-based Hong Kong diaspora groups, especially those supporting people still in Hong Kong, stated that their beneficiaries are increasingly wary of connecting with overseas groups, fearing surveillance by Hong Kong authorities. Concerns include monitoring of WhatsApp, Signal and bank accounts. One participant noted that beneficiaries imprisoned for their roles in the 2019 and 2020 protests are often questioned by prison officers about overseas financial support for their families. If discovered, the beneficiaries may face solitary confinement as punishment.

- **Freedom of expression scrutinised on campus**

A participant described attending a Chinese studies academic conference covering topics including the literature of the Uyghur community at a UK university, where PhD students from China felt too intimidated to ask questions. The university management also showcased images of themselves shaking hands with Chinese embassy officials, and this led to an uneasy and insecure feeling among students in seeking help regarding transnational repression from their university. Another participant attempted to present a Lennon flag symbol (one of the Hong Kong protest symbols) at a university but was rejected due to its "sensitive" nature.



Additionally, participants from academia raised concerns about the austerity measures of UK universities that have limited their income sources, leading to over-reliance on funding from China.

- **Pressure from worrying families and friends in Hong Kong**

A participant, a young activist previously targeted by state-owned Chinese media, has not observed any surveillance by Hong Kong or Chinese government agents while in the UK. However, the participant's family in Hong Kong is concerned due to the previous exposure of their personal information. They explicitly urged the participant to cease overseas activism. Friends in Hong Kong have also warned the participants against forming connections with foreign activists.

Another participant active in advocating for Hong Kong, reported that friends who recently visited the UK for leisure were questioned by the Hong Kong authorities upon returning to Hong Kong. They were asked whether they had met with the participant and what they knew about the participant's activities in the UK.

## **Part 2: How is the UK government responding to transnational repression? What can be improved?**

Most participants with lived experience of transnational repression believe the UK government is providing insufficient support to them as victims, witnesses or concerned individuals reporting cases or seeking help. This lack of institutional support and clarity about where to find assistance is evident in various areas:

- **Lack of a working definition and documentation of transnational repression**

The UK government addresses transnational repression as a form of "state threats", focusing on preventive and reactive responses through a national security lens. While this approach is effective for high-risk activists facing physical violence and intimidation that may amount to criminal offences, it falls short in understanding and contextualising transnational repression as a human rights violation that may encourage solutions beyond criminalisation and securitisation. There is no working definition of "transnational repression" that incorporates insights from diaspora communities and human rights organisations to hamper the development of a cohesive and rights-centred response across government departments.

Participants were of the view that the UK government should clarify the definition of transnational repression, recognising it as a multi-dimensional threat in both the physical and digital realms. This includes not only bodily harm and extreme threats to personal safety, which align with criminal offences, but also more subtle, indirect and online forms of transnational repression such as doxing, surveillance, harassment of relatives and friends in one's home country, and the infiltration of Chinese agents into overseas activist networks for intelligence gathering.

The vagueness and lack of transparency surrounding transnational repression contribute to a climate of fear. Participants believe the UK government should track, document and publicise incidents and patterns of transnational repression incidents on UK soil. This



information would help civil society actors monitor the situation and develop their own risk assessments and mitigation plans based on credible official data.

- **Law enforcers lack the awareness needed to provide support and protection**

A participant wanted by the Hong Kong government with bounties said, despite media coverage of their situation, no UK police have offered support or protection. When the participant found out they were a target of surveillance and hostile activities allegedly funded by the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in May 2024,<sup>6</sup> they emailed the UK police but only received a reply advising them to call 999 in emergencies.

Another participant, also wanted by the Hong Kong government and currently under the protection of the Metropolitan Police, noted that a frontline officer may not recognise an isolated incident as part of transnational repression. They suggested that a trusted police contact for high-risk individuals would be useful. In general, law enforcers should be specifically trained to provide better support for vulnerable communities. Taking the United States as an example, the FBI has adopted a definition of transnational repression, created new training for its staff that will help track down and identify incidents and the training is expected to extend to local law enforcers.<sup>7</sup>

A participant shared that during the anti-migrant protests in late August, many Hongkongers were hesitant to join memorial protests for the fourth anniversary of the 2019 protests due to safety concerns. When organisers sought police support, they were told that risk evaluation and mitigation were their responsibility. The police only took events seriously when Members of Parliament (MPs) were involved. Additionally, frontline officers often frame harassment, disruptions and verbal abuses by Chinese individuals against the Hong Kong diaspora (especially during protests) as “internal conflicts” between groups with differing political views.

- **Lack of a reporting mechanism and helpline for victims and witnesses**

There is no reporting mechanism, designated helpline or online platform for victims, their families, witnesses and NGOs to safely report cases and seek help. Participants noted that support for the Hong Kong diaspora in response to transnational repression is piecemeal and scattered. While some local organisers have built relationships with local councils and Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMP) for support, the effectiveness depends on the motivation and awareness of individual staff members. Many are uncertain about where to find information and assistance, with some MPs only advising victims to take photos of the perpetrators and report them to the police.

Many participants suggested establishing a hotline, a unit or a task force within the UK government to handle reports and complaints related to transnational repression. This team should be specially trained with the knowledge and skills to engage with victims and the affected community. The participants emphasised that a comprehensive government response to transnational repression should not solely rely on the police and a securitised approach. Instead, it should involve a range of government departments and social services,

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<sup>6</sup> The Guardian, Three men accused of aiding Hong Kong intelligence service appear in London court, 14 May 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/may/13/three-men-charged-with-aiding-hong-kong-intelligence-service-says-met>

<sup>7</sup> Freedom House, “Unsafe in America: Transnational Repression in the United States”, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/united-states>



as many acts of transnational repression and their impact extend beyond the criminal justice system and national security concerns.

- **Other suggestions**

Participants expected the UK government to take a more robust stance against transnational repression, including proactive investigations and inquiries into suspected incidents, and public disclosures following arrests and prosecutions to send a strong message that transnational repression is intolerable on UK soil. They cited examples such as the United States developing a definition of transnational repression encompassing online disinformation, which will help deter emerging forms of repression in the digital world. Another example cited was Canada's Counteracting Foreign Interference Act<sup>8</sup>, which aims at tackling transnational repression by expanding government power and scrutiny of foreign government's infiltration of local politics.

Participants expressed realistic concerns about the limitations of the UK government in developing a comprehensive mechanism to address transnational repression, citing the need for resources, expertise and a lengthy advocacy and policy-making process. They suggested short-term to mid-term achievable goals, which may include:

- 1) Better communication with local institutions (e.g., museums, churches and local councils) is needed to increase their awareness of transnational repression, facilitating and safeguarding their partnerships with the Hong Kong diaspora community and ensuring events and protests run smoothly and securely;
- 2) Before an official reporting mechanism is established, civil society actors and Hong Kong diaspora community can develop their own platform to document testimonies and evidence, provide self-help tips for activists, and facilitate the exchange of intelligence within the community on the occurrence of incidents of transnational repression;
- 3) Some Hongkongers are hesitant to share their experiences and provide vital information to government departments and MPs, as equipment purchased from China remains widely available in the UK's critical infrastructure, making the UK government susceptible to cyberattacks. Participants suggested that the UK government review the procurement practices in its critical infrastructure to prioritise security and privacy over value for money.
- 4) Bringing together a broad coalition of interested parties in support of advocacy and campaigning against transnational repression by the Hong Kong and Chinese governments and their agents, which aim to raise public and political awareness
- 5) The UK government should investigate acts of transnational repression by Hong Kong and Chinese governments on UK soil, and if supported by evidence that the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office (HKETO) is involved in surveillance and spying of diaspora activists, review the status and special privileges of HKETO in the UK

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<sup>8</sup> Parliament of Canada, "An Act respecting countering foreign interference", royal assent received on 20 June 2024, <https://www.parl.ca/legisinfo/en/bill/44-1/c-70>



## Key recommendations to the UK government

1. Develop a working definition of transnational repression based on consultation with the affected diaspora communities, human rights organisations, scholars and community service providers who might encounter victims and witnesses of transnational repression;
2. Improve official documentation of transnational repression incidents and patterns on UK soil, making this information public for monitoring purposes and allowing civil society to develop their own risk assessment and mitigation plans based on official data;
3. Provide a trauma-informed, safely accessible and multilingual reporting mechanism (e.g., hotline, online platform and apps) for victims, witnesses and NGOs to report a case and seek professional help;
4. Establish a cross-departmental unit or taskforce in response to transnational repression and its threats to diaspora communities in the UK
5. Ensure all government agencies have a comprehensive understanding of transnational repression as a threat to human rights, providing training for law enforcement and relevant departments that might encounter victims and witnesses of transnational repression;
6. Provide support, resources and training for the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK to enhance their organisational capacity and resilience against transnational repression;
7. Moving forward, the UK government should adopt a robust approach to transnational repression by foreign states with grave consequences for the perpetrators to prevent or deter hostile acts from occurring in the first place

## Useful links

Amnesty International report, *“On my campus, I am afraid - China’s targeting of overseas students stifles rights”*: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/8006/2024/en/>

Freedom House, *“United Kingdom: Transnational Repression Host Country Case Study”*  
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/united-kingdom>

Hong Kong Democracy and Students for a Free Tibet, *“Exporting Repression: Attacks on Protesters During Xi Jinping’s Visit to San Francisco in November 2023”*:  
<https://ccpexportingrepression.com>

The Rights Practice and FairSquare, *“Addressing the challenge of transnational human rights violations in the UK”*  
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