

The Symbol of a New, Darker Hong Kong
Timothy McLaughlin - The Atlantic



Kin Cheung / AP

Counting the votes cast in Hong Kong's chief-executive election this month took just 23 minutes. There was no hyper efficient voting technology or army of poll workers. The speed was due instead to the paltry number of ballots: Only 1,461 needed to be tabulated, and they listed just one candidate. So with a vote share that would make a dictator grin (99.2 percent), John Lee became the fifth person selected to lead the city in the postcolonial era.

Lee takes office this summer, when Hong Kong will mark 25 years under Chinese rule, the halfway point of the "one country, two systems" experiment that was meant to grant the city a high degree of autonomy, a moment rumored to be marked with a visit from President Xi Jinping.

Lee's elevation is reflective of the distrust and paranoia that has flourished in Beijing and among Hong Kong's political elites since the [2019 prodemocracy protests](#), which he helped both trigger and eventually put down.

The foreign connections that have been one of Hong Kong's defining features are seen now in a more suspect light—possible weaknesses to be exploited in an unstable world where China is under constant threat and where the city will need to be less reliant on the West, particularly the United States.

Even as officials speak of exiting strict [pandemic protocols](#) that have isolated Hong Kong for years and of a need to reinvigorate it as an international business center, the overriding priority will be that of law and order.

This will be maintained through a sprawling, powerful security apparatus, backed up by a judicial system that embraced Beijing's draconian new national-security law

while at the same time discovering a penchant for oppressive colonial rules once wielded by the British. On all counts, Lee—a former police officer and security chief who is already subject to American sanctions—fits the bill.

Though none of Lee's predecessors were elected through genuine democracy, they all made attempts to balance the desires of Beijing's leaders and Hong Kong's people, desires that were often at odds. In the city's new iteration, this will be less necessary.

Lee will likely work to portray the chief-executive role as strong and nonpolitical, supported, more so than challenged, by an obedient legislature—all with the knowledge that the chances of any popular push-back are exceedingly scant.

Lee's vision of Hong Kong is a dark one, and Beijing has cast him as the only patriot strong enough to enact it. The Chinese authorities want "someone who can stand firm against any pressure coming from the outside, protect the interest of the country, and keep away foreign interference," Jasper Tsang, a former president of the legislative council and the founder of the city's largest pro-Beijing political party who supported Lee's election, told me.
"This is what is needed now."

Lee, 64, attended a Jesuit all-boys school and, upon graduating, joined the Hong Kong Police Force in 1977, when Britain still ruled the city. By the late 1990s, he was involved in some of the city's biggest cases, including the pursuit of Cheung Tze-keung, a gangster known as "Big Spender" for his lavish gambling habits.

Cheung had undertaken a string of brazen airport thefts and abductions, kidnapping two tycoons in 1996 and 1997, respectively, and extracting tens of millions of dollars in ransom for their releases. Lee led a stakeout that uncovered a massive cache of explosives belonging to Cheung, who was caught soon after on the mainland. He was swiftly tried, found guilty, and executed by firing squad.

Lee's background and education are very much unlike those of Hong Kong's previous chief executives—and, from Beijing's point of view, that is a strength. Whereas prior leaders studied at places such as Harvard and Cambridge, or were Fulbright scholars, Lee obtained a master's degree through an Australian distance-learning program.

Previous chief executives were business-people or career bureaucrats. By contrast, Lee's blue-collar background in the police and his lack of connections to political and business elites have been touted by pro-Beijing pundits, who say that he will be unencumbered by the vested interests who hold substantial power in the close-knit world of Hong Kong politics.

Lee rose through the force's ranks over 35-odd years, but in 2011 was passed over for police commissioner in favor of a more operationally focused and charismatic candidate, a former colleague said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the political sensitivities.

Another former officer described Lee as tough and competent, but with a temper that sometimes flared because of his chronic back pain. Occasionally, during one of these

outbursts, Lee would toss a stack of files into the air. "I hope he has learned to control himself better," this person told me, "otherwise Hong Kong is in for an interesting time."

His path to the top of the police at a dead end, Lee joined the government. In a profile of Lee published after he was named chief executive, Ta Kung Pao, a state-controlled newspaper in Hong Kong, highlighted his role in outlawing the Hong Kong National Party in 2018. The small, fringe group had advocated for Hong Kong's independence from China, a position that is viewed as a red-line for Beijing. The following year, Lee played a leading role in responding to the enormous pro-democracy demonstrations that swept Hong Kong for months, after helping spur them on.

In February 2019, Hong Kong's Security Bureau, which Lee was by then leading, delivered a paper to the legislative council's security panel outlining why changes were necessary to the city's extradition policies.

Mundanelly titled "Cooperation Between Hong Kong and Other Places on Juridical Assistance in Criminal Matters," the paper proposed reforms driven by the murder in Taiwan of a young pregnant Hong Kong woman by her boyfriend, who fled back to the city and confessed to the crime, creating a quagmire: The crime was not committed in Hong Kong, so he could not be prosecuted in the city, yet no framework existed for sending him back to Taiwan to face justice. The cause was quickly taken up by pro-Beijing politicians.

The proposed legislation, largely unnoticed at first, included provisions whereby suspects could be extradited from Hong Kong to mainland China, which has a separate judicial system.

While the bill alarmed pro-democracy figures, who saw it as eroding the wall between Hong Kong's common-law courts and the mainland's opaque system, wealthy business people were at first the fiercest critics.

Many trace their fortunes to investments made on the mainland at a time where bribery and corruption were commonplace. They feared that they could be targeted in Xi Jinping's anti-corruption crackdown and brought to the mainland for trial.

Lee was tasked with selling the bill to skeptical foreign consulates and chambers of commerce, working with business leaders to create carve-outs, though doubts remained over why the bill was necessary at all.

Like the outgoing chief executive, Carrie Lam, who refused to back down on the legislation as protests escalated, Lee hardened his demeanor when faced with criticism. Lee's backers claim that he was instrumental in putting down the ensuing demonstrations, the biggest in Hong Kong's history, marshaling the police to use aggressive, violent tactics to stamp them out.

This assessment is certainly true, but incomplete. It fails to reckon with or account for Lee's role in exacerbating the demonstrations, through his work with Lam to push the bill forward despite mass protests that eventually escalated into acts of violence and vandalism.

HK01, a centrist newspaper, wrote an editorial in 2019 ripping Lee for his performance and his flippant dismissal of people's concerns about police conduct during the protests, describing him as "just one of the incompetent officials" among "a group of 'John Lees' whose heads are extremely in the clouds, leading Hong Kong into chaos."

On the streets, Lee was mocked as Pikachu, the chubby yellow rodent Pokémon, a play on his full Chinese name John Lee Ka-chiu. (The name may not have been as original as protesters thought: One of Lee's former colleagues told me that fellow members of the force called him that decades earlier.)

By the time the protests were quashed, done in by a combination of the pandemic and the national-security law imposed by Beijing, the reputation of Hong Kong's police was ruined, the confessed murderer was living freely in the city, and Lee had been promoted to the city's No. 2 position.

He carried his harsh tone and dark vision of Hong Kong to the new role. Lee pledged to relentlessly pursue the "cowards" who fled the city to escape possible jail time and welcomed the arrest of seven journalists, calling them "evil elements" who themselves had damaged press freedoms. [Ta Kung Pao's profile of Lee listed the closing of Apple Daily](#), a pro-democracy newspaper, as among his major accomplishments.

Nearly 200 people have been arrested for alleged national-security crimes, according to an analysis by Georgetown University's Center for Asian Law. "The vast majority of arrests targeted activities that would be considered peaceful and constitutionally-protected exercise of basic political and civil rights in other jurisdictions," two academics from the center [wrote](#) this year.

"In fact, such activities would have been protected in Hong Kong itself prior to the NSL's enactment in July 2020."

Lee was among several officials placed under U.S. sanctions after the law was imposed. In modern Hong Kong, however, this albatross around his neck may be more a medal of valor, one that helped rather than hurt his chances for advancement.

Having already been sanctioned, Lee has removed a possible pressure point at a time when Beijing is growing more concerned about the threat of sanctions, given the impact they have wrought on Russia following Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Beijing clearly "wants to keep the current level of control," Liu Dongshu, an assistant public-policy professor at the City University of Hong Kong, told me. This goes far beyond just stopping protests and ridding the legislature of opposition, and extends to dismantling the bonds and shared identity forged among Hong Kongers during the 2019 protests. This week, for example, state media warned that taxi drivers and shops displaying any pro-democracy symbols could be violating the national-security law.

In a rare moment of introspection, Lam admitted in 2020 that Hong Kong's chief executives "have never succeeded on any occasion when it comes to [the] very sensitive Hong Kong–mainland relationship."

She cited numerous failures that have befallen her and her three predecessors, showing the limitations of the role despite all having the backing of Beijing as well as a political field tipped heavily in their favor.

With a legislature now stripped entirely of opposition, pro-Beijing outlets have pushed the narrative that the government will be more efficient and better able to improve livelihoods.

The authorities, this narrative goes, will in turn be able to win over a population that has faced down rubber bullets and tear gas, voted for pro-democracy candidates in a landslide in the city's last free election, and seen their freedoms torn away.

For some issues, this is likely true, though not necessarily good. Lacking a pro-democracy opposition, a batch of subversion and security legislation—which triggered huge street protests in 2003 and helped to prematurely end the career of the city's first chief executive—will finally pass.

A "fake-news law" will probably also be implemented, a development that has raised concerns among Hong Kong's already beleaguered press corps. Additional controls on the internet appear imminent.

Lee has made no efforts to reach out to the few remaining members of the pro-democracy parties, which have been decimated by the national-security law as well as the re-engineered election system. Unsurprisingly, he has said that he will not pursue political reform toward universal suffrage, the city's most vexing issue.

Yet even with a legislature that is trending toward a rubber stamp, there are certain issues that cannot be quickly or easily solved. Strict pandemic regulations have kept Hong Kong largely cut off from the rest of the world, and damaged the economy: Unemployment has ticked up to 5.4 percent, just one of the challenges weighing on growth.

It is uncertain how or when Lee will be able to fully open the city to the mainland, let alone elsewhere. Lee has also pledged to tackle the city's exorbitant housing prices, but that will require challenging the confraternity of real-estate tycoons and their gilded heirs who are obscenely powerful, and tackling artificial land scarcity that keeps prices so high.

The city has also become drastically more unequal in terms of income and wealth since the 1997 handover, but the authorities have shown little interest or appetite in addressing this shift.

Whatever his efforts on these issues, however, Lee's overarching vision is unquestionably antidemocratic, and subservient to his ultimate masters—not Hong Kong's people, but Beijing's leaders.

This city was never the beacon of liberal democracy existing on the border of an autocracy, as its most vocal proponents like to claim, but it was still free. The press could criticize the authorities, the police were held to account, and the courts operated according to the rule of law. John Lee's elevation makes clear that this prior golden era of sorts is over, and a new one is under way.

One former pro-Beijing lawmaker and businessman, like others I spoke with, told me that he was cautiously optimistic about Lee, that perhaps with the right team and guidance he could steer the city through its many issues. But, he admitted, to people outside the city, "the image is that the guy with the gun is now running Hong Kong."