

Veteran American Lawyer Detained in Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Crackdown

Other lawyers fear arrest of U.S. citizen under national security law signals rising pressure on human-rights advocates



'Continue to work for democracy and human rights in Hong Kong,' John Clancey said to reporters.

Photo: lam yik/Reuters

By Dan Strumpf

HONG KONG—An American lawyer and human-rights activist was among the dozens of pro-democracy figures [arrested on allegations of subversion](#) by Hong Kong police on Wednesday, the first U.S. citizen known to be apprehended under the city's national security law.

John Clancey, who is in his 70s, was arrested and then taken to the offices of the law firm where he worked by about a dozen police, who searched his personal office before escorting him away, said the firm's founder, Albert Ho, a veteran pro-democracy leader in the city. Mr. Ho said he understood the arrest was due to Mr. Clancey's involvement in a political group active in last year's pro-democratic election primaries, events which are at the center of the investigation.

Mr. Clancey couldn't be reached for comment. People who know him said he was a decadeslong Hong Kong resident, fluent in the city's local language of Cantonese and active in a number of groups and causes advocating democracy and human rights in Hong Kong, mainland China and the region.

Hong Kong police arrested more than 50 pro-democracy figures for allegedly plotting to destabilize the government. WSJ's Andrew Dowell reports on how the biggest crackdown since the national security law was imposed chips away at the city's rule of law and global status. Photo: AP/TVB

In a video posted to social media by a local news outlet, Mr. Clancey could be seen walking with a cane from his office to a police van and surrounded by reporters. "Continue to work for democracy and human rights in Hong Kong," he said when asked if he had a message for the people of Hong Kong.

"He's certainly one of the most peaceful and reasonable persons that you're ever going to meet," said Mark Daly, a Hong Kong lawyer who has worked on human-rights issues with Mr. Clancey. "It certainly is a concern with this national security law that possibly even promoting democracy and human rights may be considered an offense."

The arrest of an American under the national security law [imposed on Hong Kong by China](#) six months ago is likely to further inflame tensions between Beijing and Washington, and fuel those pushing the incoming Biden administration to continue the U.S.'s hard line over the crackdown. President Trump's administration has repeatedly spoken out against China's efforts to crush the city's protest movement and has imposed sanctions against officials.

Beijing has issued strong rebukes in return and arrests of opposition figures in the former British colony have accelerated.

"The arrest of American citizen & human rights lawyer John Clancey under the 'National Security Law' shows the sweeping authority the #CCP has provided itself to arrest & prosecute anyone it sees as 'subverting authority,'" tweeted Republican Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee.

Antony Blinken, President-elect [Joe Biden](#)'s nominee for secretary of state, said on Twitter the administration "will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy."

A spokesman for the American consulate in Hong Kong declined to comment on Mr. Clancey's arrest. Hong Kong police didn't respond to a request for comment.

The roundup marked authorities' most aggressive wielding of the new national security law to date. Imposed by Beijing last June, the law [criminalizes several acts](#), including subversion, terrorism and foreign interference.

Mr. Clancey was arrested as part of a major sweep of the city's pro-democratic movement, which largely targeted political figures who had sought to run for the city's aborted legislative council elections last year, in addition to other high-profile activists and academics.

'The sight of police raiding a law firm's office is very alarming.'

— Antony Dapiran, Hong Kong lawyer

Mr. Clancey's arrest sent a chill through some in Hong Kong's legal community, especially those involved in human-rights or national-security cases. The city is home to many foreign lawyers registered to practice in the territory, which has a British-style legal system and an independent judiciary that has long upheld international standards of rule of law, an asset that has made the city a popular base for foreign companies and finance firms.

"Hong Kong in the common-law tradition has been a place where the role of lawyers has been respected, and the sight of police raiding a law firm's office is very alarming," said Antony Dapiran, a Hong Kong lawyer and author.

The city has also long been a haven for human-rights lawyers and those in civic societies and nongovernmental organizations who felt better protected than their counterparts across the mainland border, who often face harassment and detention.

According to his biography on the website of his law firm, Ho Tse Wai & Partners, Mr. Clancey was admitted to practice as a solicitor in Hong Kong in 1997, the year China reclaimed sovereignty of the territory from the U.K. He was educated in the U.S. and Hong Kong, and has handled medical negligence and personal injury cases.

Politically, Mr. Clancey was treasurer of the group Power for Democracy, which helped organize last year's pro-democratic primaries, according to people who knew him. He is also chairman of the Asian Human Rights Commission and an executive committee member of the China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, an advocacy body.

Mr. Ho said Mr. Clancey has been involved in several human-rights cases in Hong Kong as well, including those on behalf of the Falun Gong, the spiritual group officially banned in China. More recently he appeared in a legal challenge of a controversial Hong Kong housing policy on sex-discrimination grounds.

"John Clancey is a very experienced lawyer," said Mr. Ho. "He wouldn't be scared."

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