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Academics Decry Chinese Plan to Scrap Civil-Liberties Protections in Hong Kong

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HONG KONG
CHINA is preparing to scrap key provisions of Hong Kong's Bill of Rights, sparking concern among academics here about the fate of freedom of expression and assembly under their incoming government.

Less than six months before Britain will return control of its colony to China, a Beijing-appointed committee overseeing the transfer has recommended repealing parts of the 1991 legislation that put guarantees of human rights and freedoms above other laws. The outgoing British government called the committee's proposal "sadly predictable."

Public-opinion polls and a stock market rising to near-record levels suggest increasing local confidence in the impending transfer of control. But critics said the human-rights proposal raises doubts that Hong Kong—an island of freedom about to

come under the control of a nation that jails dissidents and censors its media—will be able to maintain its autonomy.

"How could you ask Al Capone to be the director of the F.B.I.?" asked Ming Chan, a professor of history at the University of Hong Kong and co-editor of a series of books on Hong Kong's transition.

'THOROUGHLY BAD'

In a statement issued after a meeting in Beijing this month, the Preparatory Committee's subgroup on legislative matters recommended the repeal of parts of the Bill of Rights, which placed human-rights provisions above all other laws. It also recommended reinstating laws that require police approval for small public gatherings and compulsory registration of all organizations.

The subgroup said the rights provisions contravene the Basic Law, the mini-con-

stitution that will govern Hong Kong after July 1, when China takes control.

Scrapping the human-rights reforms would be "thoroughly bad," said Martin Lee, chairman of the local Democratic Party and one of Hong Kong's most vocal advocates of democratic reforms. The colonial government introduced the reforms after China's 1989 crackdown on the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protesters.

Tung Chee-hwa, the shipping magnate and business leader who was chosen last month by a Beijing-appointed committee to run the local government when China takes over, already has said that Hong Kong must accept its Chinese future. Even before his selection, Mr. Tung had said that the new government would, for example, no longer allow groups here to advocate independence for Tibet and Taiwan, which Beijing considers a rebel province.

As chief executive of the Hong Kong

Special Administrative Region of China, Mr. Tung also will be chancellor *ex officio* of the territory's seven publicly supported universities. He called reaction to the latest proposals "overdramatic" and said the people of Hong Kong were "misguided" by claims made by Mr. Lee and his allies that the proposals endanger guarantees of free speech, assembly, and religion.

But a spokesman for the colony's British-appointed government called the proposals "a retrograde step, which will deal a body blow to human rights."

Academics here say Hong Kong's tradition of free expression has helped attract top scholars from around the world to its universities. Surveys, including one by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, have found that heavy-handed rule by the Chinese would, in the future, discourage such people from coming or staying.