

When Liberal Democracies Mirror Totalitarian Speech Regulation: The Case of Queensland

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KA HANG WONG, MAY 9 2026

In what is widely regarded as one of the world's most liberal democracies, the state of Queensland, Australia, has recently enforced legislation leading to the arrest of a pro-Palestinian demonstrator for wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan "from the river to the sea," a phrase widely associated with Palestinian political aspirations, though its meaning remains contested. Its application exposes a profound contradiction: the Australian federal government recognises the Palestinian State, yet the Queensland government now criminalises certain expressions of solidarity with them. The case mirrors patterns seen in other contexts, most notably Hong Kong, where slogans such as "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" have been treated as unlawful under national security provisions. Such enforcement highlights a troubling tension between the liberal ideals of free speech and the practical realities of political risk management, revealing how even democratic societies may suppress dissent under the guise of protecting vulnerable communities, or, in the Hong Kong case, the Chinese state itself, which asserts sovereignty over the territory in question.

This article examines how political systems that have previously exhibited liberal-democratic characteristics regulate expressions of dissent, focusing on the two slogans that have emerged in response to external domination and subsequent political constraint. While originating in distinct contexts, both slogans articulate claims to self-determination and have been subject to legal restriction. This analysis conceptualises these processes as interpretive governance of political expression, referring to the capacity of state institutions to shape and stabilise the meaning of political language through legal and security frameworks. By comparing their treatment in Hong Kong and Queensland, the analysis highlights how the interpretation of political language can shift from contested meaning to regulated expression.

Historical Background

The slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times" has emerged as one of the most prominent expressions of Hong Kong's demand for self-determination. First popularised by Edward Leung during the 2016 Legislative Council by-election campaign, it was later revived and widely adopted throughout the 2019 protest movement. In the aftermath of the imposition of the Hong Kong National Security Law and the subsequent exile of many Hongkongers, the slogan has continued to resonate in diaspora communities, particularly in the United Kingdom, where it is frequently heard at protest gatherings.

The slogan operates as a powerful framing device. It casts Hong Kong as a city subjected to authoritarian control while positioning the protest movement as a form of resistance against the interference of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into Hong Kong's affairs. The invocation of "revolution" implies not merely reform, but a fundamental restructuring of Hong Kong's political system, specifically the establishment of democratic governance through universal suffrage (Wong 2025, 88). Crucially, the legal treatment of the slogan has not depended solely on its literal wording, but on how authorities interpret its political implications, particularly its perceived challenge to state sovereignty.

"Liberate Hong Kong" itself carries layered meanings. In its earlier usage, it reflected aspirations for self-

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determination through a decisive break from Chinese sovereignty or the removal of the CCP's control over the territory. As Edward Leung articulated during his campaign, many Hongkongers came to believe that meaningful autonomy or democratic development promised under the Joint Declaration was unattainable under Chinese rule. However, the slogan has since evolved. Following the introduction of the British National (Overseas) visa pathway, "liberation" has also come to encompass freedom from fear, particularly fear of political repression under Beijing's claimed authority over Hong Kong. As Ho (2023, 252) has noted, this pervasive sense of anxiety has shaped two parallel responses: continued resistance among those who remain, and exile among those who seek safety in the mother country.

For members of the Hong Kong diaspora, especially those resettled in the United Kingdom, the slogan retains both its political and emotional significance. While exile may provide a degree of physical security, it does not sever their attachment to a once liberal-democratic city (Lu 2025, 3). Rather, the continued use of the slogan abroad reflects an enduring identification with a stateless nation resulting from the incorporation of Hong Kong into the PRC political order and an ongoing commitment to Hong Kong's political future.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the treatment of the phrase "from the river to the sea." The expression refers geographically to the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, encompassing Israel and the Palestinian territories, and has been used in various forms since the mid-twentieth century within Palestinian political discourse, particularly among groups advocating for self-determination. Its meaning, however, remains highly contested. For many pro-Palestinian activists, the phrase expresses a call for equality, freedom, and rights for Palestinians across that entire area, representing a vision of liberation from occupation and displacement. At the same time, others within Jewish communities and pro-Israel perspectives interpret the slogan as implying the elimination of the State of Israel, as it appears to envision a single political space replacing the current Israeli state. Consequently, authorities in countries such as Australia have, in some contexts such as Queensland, treated the slogan as potentially antisemitic or threatening, depending on its use and perceived implications. It is precisely this dual interpretation that renders the slogan legally and politically contentious. Its ambiguity allows it to function simultaneously as a call for liberation and, in the eyes of critics, as a form of exclusionary or hostile rhetoric.

It is important to note that the regulation of the slogan in Queensland cannot be understood in isolation from the broader domestic context, particularly in the aftermath of the 2025 Bondi Beach shooting. The attack, which targeted members of the Jewish community during a Hanukkah celebration and resulted in multiple fatalities, was widely characterised by authorities as motivated by antisemitism and prompted a significant national response, including heightened concern over hate speech and social cohesion. Within this climate, expressions such as "from the river to the sea" have been interpreted by the Queensland parliament through a precautionary lens, with their restriction justified as part of a broader effort to mitigate perceived risks of hostility or intimidation toward Jewish Australians.

By contrast, slogans associated with Hong Kong, such as "Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times," have not attracted comparable regulatory attention in Australia. This divergence appears to reflect differences in how risks are assessed within the domestic context: while rhetoric linked to the Israel-Palestine conflict has been more readily associated with the potential for intercommunal tension, Hong Kong-related expressions are generally perceived as less likely to translate into immediate or localised forms of conflict. This suggests that the regulation of political speech is shaped not only by its content, but by how authorities interpret its potential consequences within a given social and political environment.

Typology of Speech Governance

A useful way to compare these cases is to distinguish not only between legal mechanisms of speech regulation, but also between the broader constitutional logics that organise how speech is interpreted and constrained. While all three contexts— Hong Kong, Israel, and Queensland—involve interpretive processes, they differ in whether interpretation is anchored in sovereignty, liberal adjudication, or preventive governance. It is also important to note that in the Hong Kong case, interpretive authority over political speech is shaped by the incorporation of national security legislation enacted at the level of the central Chinese state, which embeds sovereignty-based reasoning into the local legal order (Zhu 2023, 45). The three distinct speech-governance regimes are not equivalent political units,

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but sites through which different legal logics structure the interpretation and regulation of political expression.

In Hong Kong, the National Security Law represents a restructuring of legal interpretation around a sovereignty-security logic. Rather than regulating specific expressions as such, it establishes broad offence categories such as secession and subversion, within which political speech is subsequently reclassified. Interpretation is therefore embedded within a constitutional framework that prioritises state security, such that the meaning of political expression is often determined by its perceived alignment with or challenge to sovereign authority.

Israel, by contrast, should be understood as a liminal case within liberal legality rather than a structurally equivalent model. Here, restrictions on political expression are primarily governed through incitement doctrines and judicial balancing tests that assess intent, context, and likelihood of harm. Recent scholarship on Israeli speech regulation has highlighted concerns that antiracism and counter-terrorism frameworks may, under certain conditions, generate a “slippery slope” in which harm-based reasoning is extended beyond its initial justificatory scope, potentially narrowing the space for expressive freedom (see Medina 2020, 820). However, these developments remain contested within an ongoing liberal legal framework. Interpretation in this context is therefore not pre-structured by a unified security logic but emerges through case-by-case adjudication within a system that continues to recognise strong constitutional protections for speech.

Queensland, meanwhile, reflects a preventive harm framework in which political expression is evaluated through anticipated social effects, particularly in relation to the protection of vulnerable communities. Within this framework, regulatory attention is directed toward the potential of speech to generate hostility, intimidation, or social division. On this basis, the slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times” is not currently understood as posing a sufficient risk of anti-Chinese hostility or public disorder to justify restriction. Queensland is selected as a comparative case because it illustrates a contemporary liberal-democratic setting in which debates over politically charged speech are framed through harm prevention, enabling comparison with other systems where interpretive governance is similarly central.

These cases suggest a graduated spectrum rather than discrete categories: Hong Kong represents a sovereignty-centred reconstitution of legal meaning; Israel a contested and internally plural liberal legal order in which expansion of harm-based reasoning remains debated; and Queensland an emerging preventive model oriented toward social cohesion and risk mitigation. The significance of this typology lies not in asserting equivalence between systems, but in tracing how interpretive authority over political speech can produce outcomes that resemble illiberal forms of governance in their practical effects on dissent.

Strong States, Weak States, and the Policing of Speech

I have argued in a pragmatics forum that differences in how national governments regulate political expression are rooted in how they understand their own resilience (Wong 2026, 492). In this respect, Australia and China can be seen as operating from contrasting assumptions about the relationship between state authority and society. Placing China alongside Australia brings into focus a crucial difference in how legal systems handle politically sensitive expression: whether meaning is fixed by the state or open to interpretation.

In Australia, the federal state is generally treated as institutionally secure, capable of accommodating disagreement while maintaining order. Legal restrictions on speech are therefore framed as limited interventions aimed at reducing harm between groups, rather than as measures necessary to defend the state itself. The enforcement of antisemitism legislation in Queensland illustrates this point. However, as the earlier discussion suggests, this approach also relies on interpretive judgments about meaning and intent. Debates in early 2026 over proposed vilification measures in Australia illustrate that questions about overreach, unintended consequences, and the protection of legitimate expression are actively contested. Lawmakers from across the political spectrum raised concerns about how broadly such provisions might be applied, particularly in relation to religious and political speech. This ongoing negotiation reflects a system in which legal meaning is not entirely predetermined but shaped through competing interpretations. When judgments become expansive, the distinction between managing social harm and constraining political expression can begin to blur.

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A different logic is visible in China. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the Chinese state established a definitive narrative of the events and restricted alternative interpretations. This illustrates a form of state weakness understood as institutional insecurity, where the deployment of mass violence against students and civilians is coupled with an intensified drive to eliminate interpretive plurality and secure narrative closure over historical events. Over time, this approach has shaped a broader political environment in which certain topics are not merely contested but effectively removed from public discussion. The significance of this development lies not only in the prohibition itself, but in the underlying principle that the state may authoritatively determine the meaning and legitimacy of political expression.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, the governing framework treats dissent as a potential threat to sovereignty itself. This approach reflects a broader narrative in which political stability is seen as fragile and constantly at risk. As a result, expressions calling for self-determination, which might be open to debate elsewhere, are reclassified as national security offences. The contrast becomes especially clear in the treatment of slogans. In Hong Kong, phrases like “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times” are not engaged as competing political viewpoints but are instead read through a security lens that emphasises their possible implications for state unity. This shifts the focus from what is said to what it is believed to represent, narrowing the space for alternative political identities and interpretations.

This represents a marked departure from Hong Kong’s earlier political environment. Prior to 2020, the territory maintained a liberal-democratic system that allowed political pluralism, including competitive elections and a relatively open media landscape. The shift in legal interpretation has therefore not only restricted particular forms of speech but has also transformed the broader conditions under which political disagreement can occur. This shift is visible in a series of high-profile developments, including prosecutions linked to the 2020 primary elections, the detention of prominent figures such as Jimmy Lai, and the shutdown of Apple Daily. These cases point to a broader pattern: once certain forms of expression are associated with threats to national security, their political content becomes secondary to the risks they are perceived to pose. In effect, speech is evaluated less on what it explicitly communicates and more on how it is interpreted within an overarching narrative of security.

These differences suggest that the way a legal system handles interpretation can have far-reaching effects. Where meaning is tightly controlled and linked to questions of security, the scope for political expression contracts. Where interpretation remains open and subject to debate, there is greater space for disagreement, even if that space is imperfect and unevenly distributed. In this sense, Hong Kong functions as a cautionary reference point. While Queensland operates within a democratic framework, its recent approach to regulating certain slogans raises a broader question: how far can interpretive judgments be extended before the boundary between preventing harm and restricting dissent begins to erode?

Lessons from Hong Kong: When Interpretation Hardens into Prohibition

The Hong Kong experience offers a useful lens through which to consider the longer-term implications of regulating political expression through expansive interpretation. In contexts where the meaning of speech is increasingly determined by authorities rather than debated within society, the boundary between managing harm and suppressing dissent can shift in subtle but consequential ways. Against this backdrop, Queensland’s recent approach to regulating certain slogans raises a significant question. Its reliance on contested interpretations of political language introduces a similar logic: that meaning can be fixed in advance of debate. When this occurs, expressions that are intended as political claims risk being recast as threats, narrowing the space for legitimate disagreement.

The Hong Kong case demonstrates how a system that once permitted political pluralism, including a fully elected legislature in the territory’s final years as part of the British Empire, has now moved toward tighter control following the Chinese imposition of the Hong Kong National Security Law in violation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The Queensland legislation similarly arises within an established liberal democratic framework and raises parallel questions about its constitutionality. These examples suggest that the boundary between protecting communities and constraining dissent is not fixed, and that even democratic societies must remain attentive to how legal interpretations of political expression evolve over time.

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The comparison should not be overstated, however. Queensland is not Hong Kong, and the structural conditions of governance remain fundamentally different. A distinction lies in the mechanisms available for political change. In Queensland, as in other democratic systems, contested legislation remains subject to legal challenge and electoral accountability. Governments can be replaced through regular elections, and legislative priorities may shift in response to public opposition. In this sense, legal frameworks remain formally reversible within established institutional channels.

In Hong Kong, by contrast, the space for converting political disagreement into institutional change has become structurally constrained. Since the introduction of the Hong Kong National Security Law, key questions of governance have been increasingly shaped by sovereign authority at the national level, rather than through local electoral competition. As a result, meaningful reform of the legal framework is not primarily driven by local political turnover, but by higher-level constitutional and sovereign processes that lie outside ordinary democratic contestation. This divergence affects not only how laws are interpreted, but also how political agency is expressed within each system. In the Hong Kong case, democratic processes are effectively foreclosed by the totalitarian party-state, such that their restoration would require the overthrow of the Chinese government (Wong 2026, 505).

The enforcement of arrest warrants and financial bounties against individuals associated with overseas pro-democracy activism illustrates the point: dissent is framed through the language of national security rather than treated as ordinary political expression. This reflects a sovereignty-security orientation in which the state prioritises the containment of perceived subversion beyond its territorial boundaries, extending the reach of its legal and symbolic authority into the diaspora. In this sense, political agency is not merely constrained domestically but is also redefined through extraterritorial practices that seek to regulate opposition even outside formal jurisdiction. This implies that meaningful political autonomy in Hong Kong is unlikely to emerge under existing structures of Chinese sovereign control, leading some scholars to consider alternative forms of political reconfiguration, including proposals for British recolonisation of Hong Kong as a means of achieving independence (e.g., Carrico 2022). The lesson for Queensland is this: within a liberal-democratic system such as Queensland in the Australian federation, excessive reliance on anticipatory harm frameworks in regulating political expression may risk projecting institutional insecurity, with the effect that regulatory practices come to mirror the Chinese totalitarian state in its treatment of dissent.

The trajectory observed in Hong Kong illustrates how the gradual narrowing of interpretive space within a once liberal-democratic order can alter the relationship between citizens and the state. In both Queensland and Hong Kong, the institutional interpretation of political expression produces asymmetries in which state-aligned narratives are stabilised as authoritative, while oppositional framings are more readily problematised or restricted. If the meaning of political expression is increasingly determined by authority rather than negotiated publicly, the distinction between protecting communities (or, in the Hong Kong case, the preservation of the party-state's sovereign authority and its associated narrative of territorial integrity) and constraining dissent may become progressively more difficult to sustain.

About the author:

Ka Hang Wong received his PhD in History from the University of Technology Sydney in 2026. His thesis provides a historical analysis of BN(O) status and how it evolved from being a token of British nationality into a tool of political resistance against a totalitarian party-state's assault on Hong Kong.