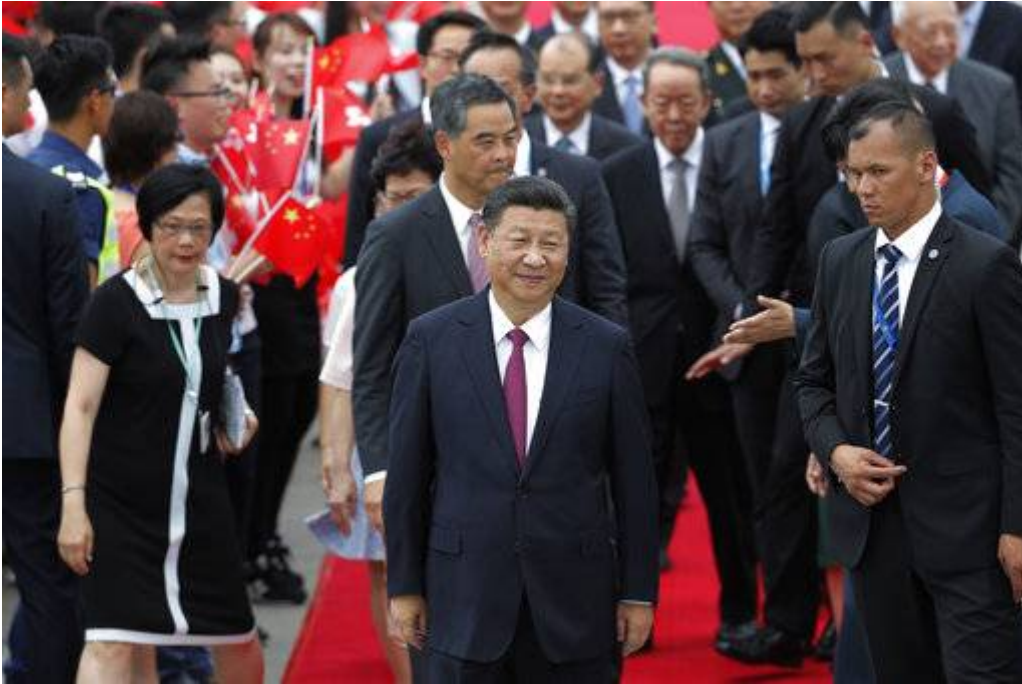


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China's Xi marks Hong Kong anniversary as protests planned



Chinese President Xi Jinping, front center, arrives at Hong Kong's airport, Thursday, June 29, 2017. Hong Kong is planning a big party as it marks 20 years under Chinese rule. But many people in the former British colony are not in the mood to celebrate. Fireworks, a gala variety show and Chinese military displays are among the official events planned to coincide with a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping starting Thursday for the occasion.

Associated Press

AP By KELVIN CHAN

HONG KONG -- China's President Xi Jinping was greeted by supporters waving red Hong Kong and Chinese flags as he arrived Thursday to mark two decades since China took control of the former British colony.

Xi's Air China plane touched down at midday for a three-day visit, which culminates Saturday when Xi will oversee an inauguration ceremony for the Asian financial hub's new leader, Carrie Lam.

Pro-democracy activists staged protests ahead of his visit and more were expected. Hong Kong authorities were taking no chances with disruptions and deployed heavy security across the city.

Police and barricades lined the streets around a downtown convention center and hotel complex where Xi was expected to spend most of his time.

Three pro-democracy groups said 26 of their members were arrested Wednesday evening on public nuisance charges for staging a sit-in at a giant flower sculpture near the complex. They were still being detained by the time Xi arrived, the groups said.

Those arrested included Joshua Wong, the young activist who helped lead 2014's "Umbrella Movement" protests, and Nathan Law, another student protest leader who was elected to the legislature last year.

Xi is visiting to mark the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover, when Britain ceded control of its colony to China at the stroke of midnight on June 30, 1997.

"It's been nine years since I last set foot in this place. I'm thrilled," Xi said on the airport tarmac. "Hong Kong has been tugging away at my heart," he said, adding that the anniversary of Hong Kong's "return to the motherland" on Saturday is "a big deal, a joyous occasion for the country and for Hong Kong."

He said one of the purposes of his trip is to plan for Hong Kong's future.

"We would like to look back at the 20 years of Hong Kong's extraordinary journey, learn from our experiences, and look forward to the future, to ensure the stable development of 'one country, two systems,'" he said in brief remarks before speeding off in a motorcade.

Under a principle known as "one country, two systems," China took control of Hong Kong while promising to let it keep civil liberties like freedom of speech and considerable autonomy from the mainland for 50 years. But a string of recent incidents, most notably the secret detention of five Hong Kong booksellers on the mainland, have stoked fears that Beijing is eroding that principle.