

Hong Kong air pollution blamed on political system

June 26 2010, By JOYCE WOO , Associated Press Writer



In this Feb. 3, 2007 file photo, women cover her mouths in an attempt to shield themselves from air pollution as they cross a main street in Hong Kong. Hong Kong officials have long blamed Chinese factories in neighboring Guangdong province for the city's worsening air quality. But environmental activists say much of the problem lies at home, and that Hong Kong's limited democracy in which the legislature is stacked with pro-business interests, has thwarted attempts to address local pollution. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

(AP) -- Democracy activists are not the only ones unhappy with a slow pace of electoral reform in Hong Kong.

Environmentalists blame the city's political setup - which guarantees a strong voice for business - for stymieing efforts to clean up Hong Kong's increasingly dirty air.

"The city's dysfunctional political system is holding back environmental reform," said Joanne Ooi, head of the Clean Air Network.

China has allowed limited democracy in the territory of 7 million people since taking control of the former British colony in 1997. Voters elect only half of the 60-member legislature. The other half is selected by various interest groups that tend to be pro-Beijing - mostly industries and professions such as lawyers and doctors.

The legislature agreed this week to add 10 elected seats for the next election in 2012, increasing the body's size to 70. It also expanded the selection committee for Hong Kong's leader to 1,200 people.

Democracy activists criticized the moves as too incremental, and the changes aren't expected to tip the balance on environmental issues either.

Hong Kong has large green areas: 40 percent of its roughly 400 square miles (1,000 square kilometers) is reserved for [nature conservation](#), recreation, outdoor education and ecotourism.

However, most residents live and work in the less than 25 percent of the land that is developed, where traffic is dense and the air quality - by at least one measure - is getting worse.

Roadside concentrations of [nitrogen dioxide](#) rose in 2009 to their highest level since monitoring began in 1998. They averaged about 110 micrograms per cubic meter of air, nearly triple the [World Health Organization](#) target of 40 for the lung-damaging pollutant.

"The air is terrible," said 32-year-old office worker Karen Wong, one hand covering her mouth and nose as she walked down Nathan Road, a main thoroughfare. "The fumes really get to me. My throat gets irritated when I step outside."

Hong Kong officials have long blamed factories in mainland China for the dirty air, but environmentalists say much of the problem lies at home. A 2007 study found the city is the dominant source of its own pollution slightly more than half the time.

Aging buses and trucks make up about one third of the fleet, and ships and ferries in Hong Kong's legendary harbor burn bunker fuel, which is several thousand times more polluting than the diesel generally used in Europe and North America according to environmentalists.

Green campaigners say it is a political problem more than anything else.

The transport industry is fighting legislation that would require drivers to switch off their engines while vehicles are stationary. Similarly, bus operators are resisting a proposal to fit buses with pollution control equipment, saying older buses do not have room for the device.

Miriam Lau, the lawmaker who represents the transport industry, said the government needs to offer higher financial incentives to bus companies to switch to cleaner engines.

"Environmentalists like to point the finger at us, saying we are stopping environmental bills from being passed. That is not the case, far from it. The transport sector wants to see a cleaner Hong Kong too," she said. "But any environmental bill that is passed needs to be ... reasonable for transport businesses and environmental groups."

James Seymour, a senior research fellow at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said that many of the business interests represented in the legislature benefit financially from weak environmental regulation.

Other groups such as environmentalists, human rights advocates, bicyclists and mass transit riders don't have designated seats.

"This goes a long way in explaining why the environment is given such short shrift in Hong Kong," he said.

Change seems unlikely anytime soon in what has long been a business-friendly city.

Philip Wong, who represents the commercial sector in the legislature, said the political system gives voice to groups that help drive the economy.

"The commercial sector is particularly crucial to the [Hong Kong](#) economy," he said. "We give many people jobs. We also inject a practical, economic perspective to things. ... Other legislators cannot do that."

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