Hong Kong: First person charged under national security law found guilty

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The first person to be charged under Hong Kong's controversial national security law has been found guilty in a landmark ruling.

Tong Ying-kit was convicted of inciting secession and terrorism after riding a motorbike into police and flying a flag calling for Hong Kong's "liberation".

More than 100 people have been arrested under the law since it came into force in 2020.

It reduces Hong Kong's autonomy and makes it easier to punish activists.

Beijing insists that the widely criticised law, which was introduced after a series of mass pro-democracy protests in 2019, is needed to bring stability to the city.

Tuesday's verdict, which is the culmination of a 15-day trial, means Tong could face life in jail. His sentencing is due at a later date.

He was sentenced at a trial without jury - a departure from Hong Kong's common law tradition. The defence team had argued for a jury but Hong Kong's justice secretary argued that the jurors' safety would be put at risk given the city's sensitive political climate.

'Liberate Hong Kong'

The 24-year-old was arrested in July last year, after he rammed his motorcycle into a group of police officers on the street. At the time he was carrying a black protest flag emblazoned with the phrase "liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times".

During the sentencing, Justice Toh said the phrase was capable of inciting others to commit secession, local outlet HKFP reported.

Justice Toh had added that Tong understood the slogan carried a secessionist meaning - implying the separation of Hong Kong from the Chinese mainland.

They also found his failure to stop at police check lines and his eventual crashing into officers - was a "deliberate challenge mounted against police", local reports said.

"The defendant carried out those acts with a view to intimidating the public in order to pursue his political agenda," Justice Toh was quoted as saying.

Dozens of journalists and members of the public were packed into the small courtroom to hear the verdict.

The BBC's Grace Tsoi, who was at court, said there was "utter silence" when the verdict was read out. Tong appeared very calm and waved to supporters before being led out of the dock, our correspondent said.

The verdict sets the tone for how future cases under the law might be interpreted.

"The conviction of Tong Ying-kit is a significant and ominous moment for human rights in Hong Kong," said Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Regional Director Yamini Mishra in a statement.

"Today's verdict underlines the sobering fact that expressing certain political opinions in the city is now officially a crime, potentially punishable by life in jail."