

立法會 *Legislative Council*

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Panel on Constitutional Affairs

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 18 May 2009

Voting rights of prisoners

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the voting rights of prisoners and gives a brief account of the relevant discussions held by the Panel on Constitutional Affairs (the Panel) on the policy options on the relaxation of the ban on prisoners' voting right as summarized in paragraphs 15 to 24 and on the proposed relaxation of the relevant existing restrictions as summarized in paragraphs 25 to 27.

Background

Current statutory provisions relevant to the voting rights of prisoners

2. Article 21 of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights (Cap. 383) which was enacted in 1991 provides that -

"Every permanent resident shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 1(1) and without unreasonable restrictions -

- (a) to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
- (b) to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;
- (c) to have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in Hong Kong."

Article 1(1) referred to in Article 21 provides that -

"The rights recognized in this Bill of Rights shall be enjoyed without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

3. Article 26 of the Basic Law provides that permanent residents of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) shall have the right to vote and the right to stand for election in accordance with law.

4. Under sections 31 and 53 of the Legislative Council Ordinance (Cap. 542) (LCO) and section 30 of the District Councils Ordinance (Cap. 547), a person who is serving a sentence of imprisonment or a person who has been sentenced to death or imprisonment but has not served the sentence or received a free pardon is disqualified from being registered as an elector, and from voting in the Legislative Council (LegCo) and District Council (DC) elections. Members may wish to note that similar disqualification provisions are included under sections 14 and 16 of the Village Representative Election Ordinance (Cap. 576). A member of the Election Committee is also disqualified from voting at the poll of a Chief Executive election under section 26 of the Chief Executive Election Ordinance (Cap. 569) if he is serving a sentence of imprisonment on that polling date.

Legislative history of the relevant electoral law

5. The Electoral Provisions Ordinance (Cap. 367) which was enacted in 1981 provided for the election of members of the former Urban Council and of the former District Boards. Section 11 of this Ordinance disqualified a person from being registered as an elector or from voting at the relevant elections if he had been sentenced in Hong Kong or any other territory or country to death or imprisonment for a term exceeding six months and he has not served the sentence or received a free pardon. Similar disqualification provisions were included in the Legislative Council (Electoral Provisions) Ordinance (Cap. 381) which was enacted in 1985 to cater for the first LegCo election held in that year to return members from functional constituencies. In 1990, the Electoral Provisions Ordinance was amended to cover LegCo geographical constituency elections.

6. Members may wish to note that LegCo appointed a Select Committee on 29 January 1992 "to review the arrangements for the 1991 Legislative Council elections and to report its recommendations on the arrangements for future Legislative Council elections" (the Select Committee on LegCo Elections). The Select Committee recommended that the disqualification of registration of persons who were serving sentences of imprisonment under section 11 of the Electoral Provisions Ordinance should be repealed, although the disqualification of voting should stay¹.

7. In 1995, Mr Andrew WONG presented a private Member's Bill, i.e. the Electoral Provisions (Amendment) Bill 1995 which sought to remove certain restrictions on registration as an elector, voting or nomination as a candidate at an election and holding office as an elected Member of LegCo, the two former Municipal Councils and the former District Boards, as contained in the Electoral Provisions Ordinance and the Legislative Council (Electoral Provisions) Ordinance, including the disqualification provisions applicable to prisoners. The Bill was voted down at the Council sitting held on 28 July 1995.

¹ paragraph 5.17 of the Report of the Select Committee on LegCo Elections

8. The Electoral Provisions Ordinance and the Legislative Council (Electoral Provisions) Ordinance were not adopted as the law of HKSAR upon its establishment on 1 July 1997. The Administration presented in that year the LegCo Bill to the Provisional LegCo. The Bill provided for the constitution of LegCo and related matters including the election of LegCo Members. The disqualification provisions applicable to prisoners in the Bill were identical to those in the Electoral Provisions Ordinance and the Legislative Council (Electoral Provisions) Ordinance, but the limitation of imprisonment exceeding six months was removed.

9. When the Bill resumed its Second Reading debate at the Council meeting on 27 September 1997, Mr Andrew WONG moved an amendment at the Committee Stage of the Bill which provided that only prisoners and escaped convicts sentenced to death or imprisonment for a term exceeding six months and who had not served their sentence in full would be disqualified from voting in Hong Kong. The amendment was negatived.

10. The District Council Ordinance which was enacted on 10 March 1999 provides for the establishment, composition and functions of DCs and the election of their members. The disqualification provisions applicable to DC electors are similar to those for LegCo electors.

Concerns previously raised by members and the Administration's position in 2005

11. At its meeting held on 30 May 2005, the Panel discussed the voting rights of prisoners with the Administration. The Administration's position at that time was that -

- (a) international human rights conventions and the Hong Kong Bill of Rights Ordinance permit reasonable restrictions on the right to vote; and
- (b) it was generally accepted in Hong Kong that when a person had been convicted of an offence and sentenced to imprisonment, he could be deprived of certain rights.

12. Some members expressed the view that prisoners should not be deprived of the opportunity to vote as it was a basic civil right. They considered that the society was changing and different restrictions could be introduced on prisoners' right to vote on the basis of the length of the sentence. These members requested that the Administration should launch a review on the issue. There was, however, another view that a change of policy was not warranted because international human rights conventions permitted reasonable restrictions on the right to vote.

13. The Administration's response was that it did not intend to launch a review on the issue at that stage. Different places had adopted different policies on prisoners' right to vote, having regard to their own circumstances. The Administration considered that the community had not called for such a review. However, if the proposal of allowing prisoners to vote were to be explored, consideration should be given to a range of issues including security arrangement, casting of vote by post, electioneering arrangement, etc.

High Court's judgment in December 2008

14. On 8 December 2008, the Hon Mr Justice Andrew CHEUNG handed down a High Court judgment on three applications for judicial review relating to a prisoner's voting rights in LegCo elections (HCAL 79/2008, HCAL 82/2008 and HCAL 83/2008). According to the judgment, the provisions disqualifying any prisoner across-the-board from registration as an elector and from voting in LegCo elections contravene the right to vote guaranteed under Article 26 of the Basic Law and Article 21 of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights. It would be a matter for the Legislature and the Executive to determine how the voting right of prisoners could be restricted in a reasonable fashion. Hon Mr Justice CHEUNG also takes the view that the constitutional right to vote of remanded persons (i.e. persons who are remanded in custody awaiting trial) is not affected by any law, and arrangements should be made to enable them to vote on election days whilst being held in custody². Upon the Administration's application, the Court granted a temporary 10-month suspension order in relation to its declaration relating to prisoners' voting right up to 31 October 2009.

Discussion on policy options on prisoners' voting right

15. The Administration briefed the Panel on 19 January 2009 on the latest developments of the three judicial review cases on prisoners' voting rights, three possible options for relaxing the disqualification provisions under LCO and the target timetable for the completion of the tasks of formulating policy options and the relevant legislative process. Members also considered the Information Note on "Voting right of prisoners" prepared by the Research and Library Services Division of LegCo (IN04/08-09).

16. Some members expressed the view that there should not be any restriction on prisoners' voting right and such rights should be given to them as soon as possible. They considered that if restrictions were to be imposed, say for example disqualifying a prisoner from registration as an elector and from voting as a result of an imprisonment exceeding a specified period, the Administration should provide ample justification for imposing the restrictions as well as for specifying such a period of time and not otherwise. These members also stressed that for the sake of safeguarding judicial independence, all the restrictions should be clearly stipulated in the law and not to be decided by the Court. Some other members cautioned that if restrictions were to be imposed, the Administration had to ensure that the cut-off line so drawn would not be subject to legal challenge.

17. The Administration informed the Panel that there were divergent views in the community as to whether restrictions on prisoners' voting rights should be abolished in entirety or whether reasonable restrictions should be imposed. A public consultation document was being prepared which would set out the various policy options and the practices in overseas jurisdictions. The Administration further assured members that restrictions, if any, imposed on prisoners' voting right would be stipulated in law.

² paragraph 203 of the judgment

18. At the Panel meeting on 16 February 2009, members were briefed on the Consultation Document on Prisoners' Voting Right (the Consultation Document) published in February 2009. Taking into account the voting arrangements for prisoners adopted overseas and the circumstances in Hong Kong, the Administration proposed the following policy options on the relaxation of the ban on prisoners' voting right -

- (a) Option One was to remove the existing disqualification provisions in section 53(5)(a)-(b) of LCO which had been ruled by the Court as unconstitutional. The disqualification of persons convicted of election-related or bribery offences under section 53(5)(c) of LCO would remain.
- (b) Option Two was to disqualify prisoners from voting if they were serving a sentence of imprisonment for a sufficiently long period (for example, 10 years or over). The length of sentence was used as a criterion to distinguish serious offences from less serious ones.
- (c) Option Three was to disqualify prisoners from voting if they were serving a sentence of imprisonment for a sufficiently long period (for example, 10 years or over) while enabling them to resume the right to vote when they were serving the last few years of imprisonment (for example, during the last five years).

19. Some members were of the view that the restrictions on prisoners' voting right should be removed in entirety, including the disqualification of persons convicted of election-related or bribery offences under section 31(1)(c) and section 53(5)(c) of LCO because the right to vote was provided in Articles 25, 26 and 39 of the Basic Law, and there was no reason to impose additional penalty by depriving prisoners, who were already serving sentences of imprisonment for their unlawful acts, of the right to vote.

20. The Administration responded that while the Court had ruled that the existing across-the-board restrictions on prisoners' right to be registered as electors and to vote under LCO were unconstitutional, it had not suggested that some form of restrictions on voting could not be imposed on prisoners. It was for the Executive and the Legislature to decide on reasonable restrictions, if any. As the issue was about human rights, the Administration had proposed three policy options for public consultation and it had no preference over any one of these options. The Administration, however, held the view that the disqualification of persons stipulated under section 53(5)(c) of LCO should remain because it helped protect the integrity of the Legislature. In addition, the provision was not covered by the three judicial review cases.

21. Some other members took the view that reasonable restrictions on prisoners' voting right could be imposed provided that the Administration was able to give ample justifications. They considered that persons convicted of election-related or bribery offences should be disqualified from voting within three years after such conviction so as to protect the integrity of the electoral system. The Administration, however, must ensure

that the justifications for imposing any restriction should not be abstract and could stand the test of judicial review, if any. A member suggested that the disqualification should preferably be based on specific crimes, rather than the length of imprisonment.

22. The Administration explained that when introducing the amendment bill into LegCo, the Administration would spell out clearly the justifications for imposing the restrictions. In the event that judicial reviews were sought against these restrictions, the Administration would be able to provide strong justifications accordingly. As regards the severity of an offence which warranted a convicted person to be disqualified from voting, the Administration had not come up with any proposal after studying overseas practices. The policy options proposed for Hong Kong were by international standard the most lenient. The length of sentence was used as a criterion to distinguish serious offences from less serious ones.

23. Some members expressed the view that in deciding whether restrictions should be removed for prisoners' voting right, it would be useful for members to understand relevant overseas practices as they were developed on the basis of the experiences as well as social and historical developments of the relevant countries. They also considered that more information should be collected on the practices adopted in Asian countries, and the justifications for the United Kingdom and the United States of America to deprive prisoners of the right to vote.

24. Some members enquired about the security and voting arrangements for prisoners and remanded unconvicted persons to exercise their voting right in the future. The Administration explained that the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) had been discussing with the relevant law enforcement agencies on the practical arrangements under which prisoners and remanded unconvicted persons might cast their votes in an election. Irrespective of whether a mobile polling station would be arranged to visit a prison or polling stations would be set up inside prisons, REO would ensure that candidates and election agents would be able to observe the poll and the counting. To protect secrecy of voting, prisoners who were eligible electors would cast their votes in a confined compartment. Consideration would be given to transferring the ballot papers to the relevant counting stations and mixing with other ballot papers before counting.

Discussion on the proposed relaxation of the existing restrictions on prisoners' voting right

25. At the Panel meeting on 20 April 2009, the Administration briefed the Panel on the results of the public consultation on prisoners' voting right and the proposed relaxation of the existing restrictions as follows -

- (a) to remove section 31(1)(a)-(b) under LCO which disqualified prisoners from being registered as electors;
- (b) to remove existing disqualification provisions under section 53(5)(a)-(b) of LCO which disqualified all prisoners from voting; and

- (c) to remove existing disqualification provisions under section 53(5)(c) of LCO which disqualified persons convicted of election-related or bribery offences from voting within three years after such conviction.

26. The Administration further briefed the Panel on the following proposed practical voting arrangements for prisoners and remanded unconvicted persons -

- (a) prisoners should be registered to the address of their sole or main home if they continue to maintain a sole or main home outside the prison;
- (b) for prisoners who did not maintain a sole or main home, the address of their last dwelling-place in Hong Kong at which they resided before serving their sentence of imprisonment should be deemed to be their only or principal residence in Hong Kong for the purpose of voter registration;
- (c) prisoners should vote in person either by arranging mobile polling stations to visit prisons with eligible electors or setting up polling stations inside prisons; and
- (d) the ballot papers cast by prisoners should be mixed with those cast by ordinary electors before the counting of ballot papers.

27. A majority of members expressed support for the Administration's decision of relaxing the existing restrictions on prisoners' voting right given that the right to vote is a basic human right which should be protected as a matter of principle. They stressed the importance of ensuring access to candidates' information by prisoners in order for them to make an informed decision in an election. These members also enquired about the practical voting arrangements for prisoners. At members' request, the Administration undertook that when the Panel was briefed at its regular meeting in May 2009 on the legislative proposal to amend the relevant subsidiary legislation to facilitate prisoners and remanded unconvicted persons to exercise their voting right, representatives of the Correctional Services Department would attend the meeting.

Legislative timetable

28. The Voting by Imprisoned Persons Bill was introduced into LegCo on 6 May 2009. The Bill provides for amendments to the relevant disqualification provisions under LCO, the Chief Executive Election Ordinance, the District Council Ordinance and the Village Representative Election Ordinance. The provisions regarding electors' registered addresses under LCO would also be amended having regard to the circumstances of prisoners. In addition, relevant subsidiary legislation under the Electoral Affairs Commission Ordinance would be amended. The Administration aims to complete the legislative process by the end of October 2009.

Relevant papers

29. A list of relevant papers which are available on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
13 May 2009

Voting rights of prisoners

Relevant documents

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Paper</u>
Constitutional Affairs Panel	30 May 2005	<p>Case referred by the Complaints Division concerning voting rights of prisoners [LC Paper No. CB(2)1143/04-05(01)] <i>(Chinese version only)</i></p> <p>Administration's paper on "Voting Right of Prisoners" [LC Paper No. CB(2)1670/04-05(03)]</p> <p>Minutes of meeting [LC Paper No. CB(2)2452/04-05]</p>
	19 January 2009	<p>Administration's paper on "Judicial review on prisoners' voting right" [LC Paper No. CB(2)660/08-09(03)]</p> <p>Background brief on "Voting right of prisoners" prepared by the LegCo Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)660/08-09(04)]</p> <p>Information Note on "Voting right of prisoners" prepared by the Research and Library Services Division [IN04/08-09]</p> <p>Letter dated 10 December 2008 from the Society for Community Organization regarding the High Court judgment on the voting right of prisoners [LC Paper No. CB(2)490/08-09(01)] <i>(Chinese version only)</i></p> <p>Submission on "Judicial review on prisoners' voting right" from the Society for Community Organization [LC Paper No. CB(2)714/08-09(01)] <i>(Chinese version only)</i></p>

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Paper</u>
		<p>Letter from the Society for Community Organization dated 16 January 2009 enclosing a letter and a submission from Mr CHAN Kin-sum, a prisoner who had applied for judicial review on prisoners' voting right [LC Paper No. CB(2)714/08-09(02)] (Chinese version only)</p>
	<p>16 February 2009</p>	<p>Consultation Document on Prisoners' Voting Right</p> <p>Administration's paper on "Consultation document on prisoners' voting right" [LC Paper No. CB(2)829/08-09(05)]</p> <p>Background brief on "Voting rights of prisoners" prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)829/08-09(06)]</p> <p>Letter dated 9 March 2009 from the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs informing the Panel of the latest development of the consultation on prisoners' voting right [LC Paper No. CB(2)1062/08-09(01)]</p> <p>Submission from a member of the public [LC Paper No. CB(2)1110/08-09(01)] (English version only)</p> <p>Submission from Civic Party [LC Paper No. CB(2)1110/08-09(02)]</p>
	<p>20 April 2009</p>	<p>Report on Public Consultation on Prisoners' Voting Right</p> <p>Administration's paper on "Results of the public consultation on prisoners' voting right and the proposed way forward"</p>

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Paper</u>
		[LC Paper No. CB(2)1309/08-09(01)] Updated background brief on "Voting rights of prisoners" prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)1311/08-09(04)]

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