

LCQ10: Proof of identity as journalists

Following is a question by the Hon Wong Ting-kwong and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Lau Kong-wah, in the Legislative Council today (December 4):

Question:

At present, there is no official organisation in Hong Kong responsible for issuing press cards. According to the constitution of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), its membership is classified into six categories, among which only full members may be issued with press cards. It has been reported that during a number of public meetings and processions held since June this year, some demonstrators at the scene disguised themselves as journalists by wearing self-made press cards in order to conceal their identity. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the respective numbers of persons arrested, prosecuted and convicted since June this year for using forged press cards; the punishments imposed on those convicted;
- (2) as some police officers have indicated that they find it difficult to distinguish between the different types of membership cards and press cards issued by HKJA and to judge the authenticity of such cards, of the measures put in place by the Government to assist police officers in verifying whether the cardholders are journalists during law enforcement; and
- (3) given that HKJA is only a trade union registered under the Trade Unions Ordinance (Cap. 332) rather than a professional body vested with statutory powers to regulate its members, and that HKJA and the various news organisations issue press cards on their own, making it difficult for people to ascertain if the cardholders are journalists, whether the Government will set up a statutory body responsible for issuing official press cards; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Security Bureau and the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, I provide a consolidated reply to the Hon Wong Ting-kwong's question as follows:

- (1) In August this year, the Police received a report from the Hong Kong Journalists Association about a suspected forged press card found at the protest scene. In addition, when handling recent protests, the Police found that some people dressed as journalists left the protest scene after being

enquired by the Police's Media Liaison Team, or engaged in acts inconsistent with the reporting work of professional journalists, which include obstructing the Police's arrest operations. This raised doubts about the authenticity of their identity as journalists. The Police do not maintain the detailed figures requested in the question. The Police would like to remind the public that anyone who produces, holds or uses a forged press card may commit forgery-related offences and is liable to a maximum penalty of imprisonment for 14 years.

(2) The Police respect press freedom and the media's right to reporting. While the Police will make every effort to facilitate media reporting as far as circumstances permit during operations, it is their statutory duty to ensure public safety and public order. Both the press and the Police have their respective responsibilities. Mutual understanding and co-operation would be conducive to the work of both sides.

Hong Kong does not have any official organisation responsible for issuing press identification. As stated in the question, according to the constitution of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, only full members may be issued with press cards. For the Police, relevant guidelines have been formulated for officers to identify and verify the identity of media practitioners during public order events or other police operations by proof of identity or documents issued by media organisations or associations. When covering public order events, media practitioners should bring along proof of identity of reporters or testimonials issued by their companies and may wear easily recognisable clothing and armbands for easy identification by police officers at the scene.

We believe that real professional journalists will not engage in illegal acts while reporting. We also hope that journalists would identify the people around them to discern whether they are really reporting. This could help prevent people, disguised as journalists, from engaging in acts with ulterior motives. If anyone comes across suspected fake journalists, they may inform the Police's Media Liaison Team for follow-up, which include checking the work passes issued to these journalists by their organisations and asking them to leave the front-line reporting area.

(3) Press freedom is Hong Kong's core value protected by the Basic Law and is the fundamental right enjoyed by the people of Hong Kong. The Government is firmly committed to safeguarding and respecting press freedom, and providing a suitable environment in which the media industry could exert its function as the fourth estate.

As to the suggestion of establishing an official organisation responsible for issuing press identification, the Chief Executive already responded at the media session on October 19, 2019. Respecting the freedom of press, the Government has no intention or plan to establish an official organisation to issue press identification.

The Government, as always, will continue to safeguard press freedom, facilitate media reporting and uphold the core value of Hong Kong.