

SOCIETY

Give youngsters arrested in unrest second chance, former justice chief urges

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A former justice chief has urged giving young people who were arrested in the 2019 anti-government protests a second chance, saying punishment alone will not change their views on society.

Elsie Leung Oi-sie, as well as businessman Irons Sze Wing-wai, made the appeal on Monday in two separate videos from Project Change, an NGO set up in 2020 to help young offenders.

"Youths are the pillars of our future society. For those who were misled or did not think things through, leading them to commit crimes, once they have learned from their mistakes and accepted the legal responsibility, we must give them a chance and allow them to start fresh," said Leung, also a former deputy director of the Basic Law Committee.

"If they are devoid of job opportunities, how can they reintegrate into society?"

Leung said Beijing officials cared about young people and Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu had also said it was society's responsibility to give offenders the opportunity to reform.

She said legal penalties were not enough to change their views of society. "It is our duty to educate them and help them understand their wrongdoing. If they have already received such education, I believe they should be given an opportunity to reintegrate into society.

"Otherwise, if they are not in harmony with society, how can they contribute to it?"

Project Change has helped about 170 young people arrested in the 2019 unrest and handled dozens of career advice inquiries as of June this year.

In another video, Sze, also the local delegate to the Standing Committee of the Chinese

People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), called on people to work together to help young offenders.

He said the political division that had been seen since the 2014 Occupy movement and the social unrest triggered by a now-withdrawn extradition bill in 2019 had never been solved.

"We cannot pretend that these events never happened. These problems cannot simply be swept under the carpet as if they are invisible," Sze said.

He added that his association, local members of provincial committees of the CPPCC Members Association, believed that societal reconciliation and mending divisions were important.



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EX-JUSTICE CHIEF ELSIE LEUNG OI-SIE

"A peaceful and harmonious society is actually beneficial for everyone," he said, adding that helping a young offender meant assisting his or her entire family.

He also said Beijing would be happy to see young offenders who had already paid the price for their actions get help. Sze noted that these young offenders could help solve the city's manpower crunch if they rejoined society.

A total of 10,279 people, aged between 11 and 87, were arrested during the protests.

Police earlier said 2,328 of them had to face legal consequences.

Many of the offenders released from prisons have said getting a job was difficult.