

AFTER THE VERDICT

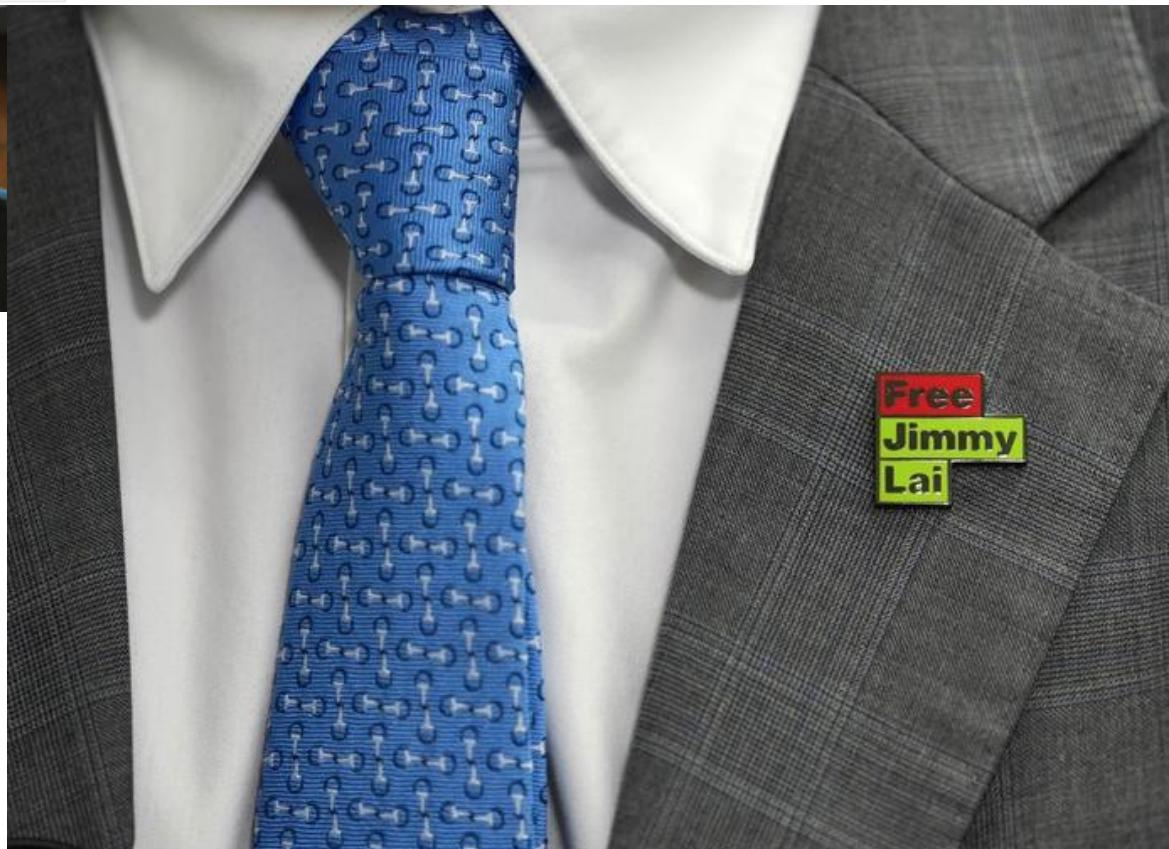
Free Jimmy Lai; don't forget Hong Kong!

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Riccardo
Cascioli



Now that the Hong Kong court has handed down a 20-year prison sentence to Jimmy Lai, the case of the *Apple Daily* newspaper publisher and editor is moving to the international stage. It could become one of the pieces to be moved in the complex chess game that will determine the new geopolitical balance.

Yesterday's reactions to the verdict have already shown what the possible moves

will be. Through Foreign Minister Lin Jian, the Chinese government expressed "full support" for the Hong Kong government and the judges' defence of national security. This was a clear message to London and Washington that the countries involved must "respect China's sovereignty and Hong Kong's legal system, refrain from making irresponsible statements, and not interfere in Hong Kong's judicial system or China's internal affairs in any form". Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio described the case as an "unjust and tragic conclusion" and called on China to grant Jimmy Lai "parole on humanitarian grounds", a request also supported by the British government through Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper. This request is justified by both Jimmy Lai's age — he turned 78 last December — and his deteriorating health during his years in prison.

There is hope that the Jimmy Lai case will be used as leverage in negotiations – whether commercial, military or political – to secure his release on humanitarian grounds, potentially involving exile to the UK with his family, while China maintains control over Hong Kong and potentially obtains concessions from the US and the UK in return.

While such a solution would certainly be desirable for Jimmy Lai, it would leave the Hong Kong issue unresolved. After all, while Jimmy Lai has rightly become the symbol of the battle for freedom and democracy, there are other journalists and pro-democracy activists in similar circumstances. Yesterday, eight others (six former *Apple Daily* employees and two members of pro-democracy associations) were sentenced alongside him to terms ranging from six to ten years. In the coming days, the verdict is also expected for three other pro-democracy activists, who could face up to ten years in prison for sedition. These are lawyer Chow Hang-tung (40), Lee Cheuk-yan (68), and Albert Ho (74), who have been imprisoned since 2021.

'Saving' Jimmy Lai while ignoring everything else would be short-sighted, because the suffocation of Hong Kong has significance far beyond the fate of its seven million inhabitants.

What is happening constitutes a flagrant violation of the Sino-British agreement, under which the United Kingdom returned Hong Kong to China on 1 July 1997. This agreement was based on the principle of 'one country, two systems', whereby Beijing guaranteed that the inhabitants of Hong Kong would enjoy the same rights and freedoms that the United Kingdom had guaranteed in the colony for 50 years. However, over the past 28 years, Beijing has progressively and systematically destroyed the Hong Kong system based on subjective, and arguably arbitrary, interpretations of the signed

agreements.

This illustrates the main difficulty in dealing with the Chinese Communist regime: its unreliability. This also explains what is happening with the secret Sino-Vatican agreement on the appointment of Catholic bishops. Until now, the Holy See has always tried to present a positive face to a negative situation, only ratifying the appointments decided unilaterally by Beijing after a humiliating delay. Not surprisingly, Beijing always ignores the Holy See in its official communiqués.

Another disconcerting aspect of Jimmy Lai's story is the total silence of the Vatican and the Church in Hong Kong. Media reports around the world simply highlight the story of an entrepreneur and publisher who fought for freedom and democracy, making him a symbol of press freedom. However, Jimmy Lai's story is much more than that.

It is a story of faith: the story of a convert who found the meaning of his battle for freedom in his encounter with Christ. Cardinal Joseph Zen, who baptised him in 1997, has been a constant and silent presence at every court hearing, which is significant. As a former journalist from his newspaper *Apple Daily* testified to the *Daily Compass*, the years in prison have shown us a true confessor of the faith and a witness of white martyrdom.

Yet the Vatican ignores him completely, seemingly more concerned with not displeasing the Chinese Communist regime than showing solidarity with a persecuted brother and setting an example for all believers. Yesterday, the Vatican media did not report the sentencing news: *Vatican News* and *L'Osservatore Romano* covered news from around the world, including Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's election victory in Japan, the massacres in Congo, the death of Italian physicist Antonino Zichichi, and the new Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Yet there was not a single line about Jimmy Lai's conviction, which was reported in newspapers around the world, both right-wing and left-wing in multiple languages.

This awkward and embarrassing silence speaks volumes about the disaster that the Vatican Secretariat of State is causing with regard to the Chinese dossier.