

HUMAN RIGHTS

Jimmy Lai at final stage of trial in Hong Kong: risks dying in prison

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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He was arrested in August 2020 and has been held in prison, in isolation, since December of the same year. His trial, ongoing since 2023, is based on purely political accusations. On Monday 18 August, Jimmy Lai, a Hong Kong entrepreneur and Catholic

publisher, will receive the sentence that will decide his fate. He is 77 years old and in poor health, and he risks dying in prison. For his son, Sebastien*, a long prison sentence would be tantamount to a death sentence. Yet until five years ago, Jimmy Lai was one of the richest and most respected men in Asia. He embodies the tragedy of a city that refuses to yield as it falls under the yoke of Communist China.

The final hearing in the Lai trial was scheduled for last week, but has been postponed twice. The first postponement was due to a typhoon that hit the south-east coast of China. The second postponement was because the court accepted the defence's request for medical assistance for the defendant. On Monday, an ambulance will be on standby, and Lai's heart will be monitored live. The elderly businessman has spent more than 1,700 days in solitary confinement. During this period his health has deteriorated significantly, and at the last hearing, when the postponement was granted, he appeared visibly emaciated and in pain.

In an interview with the BBC, Sebastien Lai said that even if his father received the most lenient sentence of five years, his life would be at risk. "It would practically be the same as a death penalty. Given his age, given his health, yeah, he will die in prison," he told the broadcaster, because "his body is collapsing". Sebastien Lai is asking British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and US President Donald Trump to act quickly to save his father's life. Trump has said that he will do 'everything he can' to secure Lai's release. Lai has been a British citizen since 1996, so his death in a Chinese prison in Hong Kong would represent a defeat for London. 'As a nation, we didn't stand up for one of our bravest when it mattered.'

Jimmy Lai was born in Guangzhou, China, on the eve of Mao Zedong's seizure of power, not in Hong Kong. His wealthy bourgeois parents were stripped of everything during the first collectivisations. As a child, Jimmy Lai had to fend for himself by doing odd jobs, such as carrying luggage at Guangzhou station. This gave him the opportunity to meet people from the 'outside world', which was a revelation for someone born and raised in abject poverty in Maoist China. It was during this period, at the age of 12, that he decided to risk everything and escape as an illegal immigrant, hiding on a fishing boat bound for Hong Kong — then a British colony.

Even after obtaining political asylum in Hong Kong, he continued to do menial jobs until he became a textile entrepreneur. He founded his own fashion company, Giordano. Having become a millionaire and a successful businessman, he sold his clothes in mainland China thanks to Deng's initial market reforms. However, the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 was a turning point for him. This prompted him

to combine his business activities with those of a human rights activist against the Chinese Communist Party. Since then, Beijing has considered him a thorn in its side, first seeking to boycott him, then to kill him and finally to eliminate him through the courts.

Jimmy Lai began his publishing career in 1990 with the launch of Next

Magazine, which openly criticised Communist leaders under the protection of Hong Kong's freedom of the press. In 1993, China retaliated by closing all his shops. However, instead of giving up, in 1995 Lai founded a second anti-communist newspaper, Apple Daily, which soon became one of Hong Kong's most widely read newspapers.

The Beijing regime took the criticism and investigations of Next and Apple

Daily very seriously. In 2008, an anonymous Chinese millionaire in Hong Kong even paid the equivalent of \$1 million to a hitman to assassinate Jimmy Lai and MP Martin Lee. However, the plot to assassinate the dissident businessman and the democratic politician failed when the killer was arrested and convicted, at a time when Hong Kong's justice system had not yet become politicised. In 2013, anonymous attackers rammed a car into the door of Jimmy Lai's home and left an axe and a machete in an act of intimidation. During the November 2014 demonstrations, Lai was physically assaulted by pro-Beijing militants. In January 2015, both the publisher's home and the Next headquarters were attacked with firebombs.

These serious acts of intimidation did not stop Jimmy Lai, a convert to Catholicism since 1997. On the contrary, they strengthened his religious and political determination to continue the fight. However, the Chinese Communists only found a way to silence him when they took control of Hong Kong, putting an end to its autonomy. In response to the mass pro-democracy demonstrations of summer 2019 and taking advantage of the lockdown during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing imposed its National Security Law on the city. This law allows the Chinese government to arrest and prosecute citizens for political offences. Jimmy Lai was arrested in August 2020 when the police raided the Apple Daily headquarters. He was charged with "conspiring with foreign powers" to the detriment of Chinese national interests.

Following Lai's arrest, the Beijing authorities also silenced the voice of his most important editorial creation. In a raid broadcast live on television on 17 June 2021, 500 police officers stormed the Apple Daily headquarters, arresting five executives and seizing computers and hard drives. At the same time, the Hong Kong authorities seized the equivalent of \$2.5 million from the publishing house and its affiliated companies, effectively rendering the newspaper unable to survive. In fact, it was forced to close just one week later.

Jimmy Lai never gave up, never chose the path of golden exile — even though he had every opportunity to do so — and allowed himself to be arrested. He continues to declare his innocence and fight his corner in the trial in which he stands accused. In one of his last interviews as a free man, he told Reuters: 'I came here with nothing; the freedom of this place gave me everything... Maybe it's time to repay that freedom by fighting for it'.

Sebastien Lai will be the special guest at the next Giornata della Bussola (Daily Compass Day) on 25 October 2025, where he will receive the 'Fatti per la Verità' (Made for Truth) award on behalf of his father, Jimmy Lai.