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CHINA

Twenty years for Jimmy Lai: the outcome of Hong Kong's sham trial

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Essentially a death sentence: twenty years in prison. This was the decision of the Hong Kong Court for Jimmy Lai, the 78-year-old publisher and entrepreneur. It was issued in execution of the guilty verdict already passed in December under the National Security

Law, which was passed by the Chinese government in 2020 with the aim of crushing the democratic movement.

Mr Lai, who was awarded the 'Made for the Truth' award by *La Bussola/Daily Compass* last October, had already spent five years in prison on other charges relating to his fight for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong. He has now been found guilty on three counts: two relating to conspiracy and collusion with foreign forces and one relating to publishing seditious material in his newspaper, the Apple Daily, which was shut down by the authorities in 2021. Six other Apple Daily executives and two pro-democracy activists were also sentenced, receiving terms ranging from six years and three months to 10 years.

In [illegible] a.m. in Britain), the judge read out the sentence in 10 minutes amid a tense atmosphere, with a large crowd inside and outside the court. Jimmy Lai's supporters had begun gathering outside as early as Friday evening amid an exceptional police presence. His wife, Teresa, was also present in the courtroom alongside Cardinal Joseph Zen, the emeritus bishop of Hong Kong. They left the court together afterwards, flanked by the police. Jimmy Lai entered the courtroom wearing a white jacket and dark glasses. He smiled broadly at his family and supporters, and Teresa greeted him with a brief wave. Jimmy remained calm and smiled briefly, even while the sentence was being read out; many of those present wept.

The sentence handed down to the publisher and editor of Apple Daily is the heaviest to date under the notorious National Security Law. Jodie Ginsberg, president of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), called it "the final nail in the coffin of press freedom in Hong Kong" and pointed out that China is the country with the most journalists in prison: 51, including eight in Hong Kong.

"Today is a dark day for anyone who believes in truth, freedom and justice," said Jimmy Lai's son, Sebastien, in a statement. Last October, Sebastien travelled to Italy to accept the 'Made for the Truth' award on his father's behalf in Vimercate. He described the sentence as 'the total destruction of Hong Kong's legal system and the end of justice'. Currently living in exile in the UK, Sebastien Lai has also been highly critical of British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Starmer visited China on 29 January and met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, but avoided raising the case of Jimmy Lai (who also holds a British passport) in order to avoid jeopardising new trade agreements between the UK and China.

Lai's daughter, Claire, described the sentence as 'heartbreakingly cruel', adding

that “if this sentence is carried out, he will die a martyr behind bars”. Even if he were to receive the maximum legal benefits for good behaviour, Jimmy Lai would not be able to leave prison until he is 90 years old. Claire has repeatedly denounced the deterioration in her father's health during his years in detention, as he suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure.

For this reason, Caoilfhionn Gallagher, the coordinator of the international team of lawyers assisting Jimmy Lai, stated that “now that this sham trial is finally over, we call on leaders from around the world to speak with one voice in their demand for China to free Jimmy Lai so that he can come home to his family in London at last”. Expulsion from Hong Kong is now the only chance of seeing Jimmy Lai, who is also a British citizen, return to freedom.

The Taiwanese authorities have also been closely following Jimmy Lai's case, as they have long been under pressure, including military pressure, from the People's Republic of China. The Beijing government has repeatedly proposed applying the same 'one country, two systems' regime to Taiwan as it does to Hong Kong. In a statement, the Taiwanese government said that Jimmy Lai's case shows that under the “one country, two systems” model of governance, the freedoms and rights promised to the people of Hong Kong are “little more than empty words”.

The Taiwanese people must “learn from Hong Kong's painful experience and safeguard the hard-won freedoms of daily life”.