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Lai sits at desk looking into camera.

Jimmy Lai, a prominent Hong Kong Catholic, philanthropist and media mogul, is pictured in Hong Kong May 29, 2020. He was arrested in August 2020 and charged with sedition and collusion with foreign powers under China's National Security Law. A bipartisan, bicameral group of U.S. lawmakers gathered Sept. 18, 2024, to call for the immediate release from prison of Lai, who is facing a trial on what they called bogus charges. (OSV News/Tyrone Siu, Reuters)

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A bipartisan, bicameral group of lawmakers gathered Sept. 18 to call for the immediate release from prison of prominent Hong Kong Catholic, philanthropist and media mogul Jimmy Lai, who is facing a trial on what they called bogus charges.

Lai, who founded the now-defunct pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, protested in favor of democratic freedoms — such as freedom of the press and expression — in Hong Kong, which was designated a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997, when British rule of that region ended after more than 150 years. Following pro-democracy protests in 2019, China implemented a purported national security law

the next year, which critics have said has been used to silence the Chinese Communist Party's critics.

Under that law, Lai was arrested in August 2020 and has been imprisoned since December 2020. He pleaded not guilty to the charges and faces life in prison.

U.S. lawmakers have called those charges trumped up and evidence the Chinese Communist Party is seeking to silence dissent.

Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Md., chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said lawmakers were seeking to draw attention to Lai ahead of the first day of the U.N. General Assembly's high-level general debate Sept. 24. The 79th session of the General Assembly opened Sept. 10.

"We've got all a lot of world leaders in New York, they're there in one place," he said. "Jimmy Lai's story needs to be told."

Lai's son, Sebastien Lai, who was in Washington at the lawmakers' event, said his father faces indignities in prison including solitary confinement.

"For his strong Catholic faith, he is denied Communion," the younger Lai said of his father.

The event featured several Catholic lawmakers who have been critical of the Chinese government including former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who still represents her state's 11th Congressional District, which includes most of San Francisco, and Reps. Chris Smith, R-N.J., and Jim McGovern, D-Mass.

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Acknowledging Smith in the audience, Pelosi said, "What's beautiful about this issue is that it has always been strongly, unequivocally bipartisan in the House and in the Senate."

"The freedom of speech is the biggest, biggest defender of democracy, because it sheds light on what is happening, and that's why Jimmy, to me, was ... so courageous to do it, because he knew what the consequences could be, because they knew how powerful his voice has been, is and will continue to be in the future," Pelosi said. "So it's an honor for me to be with each and every one of you and others

who have been working on this issue."

Smith thanked Pelosi for her efforts toward Lai's release and Hong Kong's freedom. He argued, "Injustice need not be forever."

"The time will come and I hope, will come soon, if we are resolute, if we use every lever at our disposal, every way of trying to influence Xi Jinping and his really murderous Chinese Communist Party" that Lai's release could be secured, Smith said.

McGovern issued a similar message, arguing Hong Kong's story "is still being written."

"For the government of the People's Republic of China and its newest puppet, the Hong Kong government, criminalizing the exercise of human rights is a sign of weakness," McGovern said. "It is a sign of fear. It means you don't think you can win the battles of ideas, the battle for the hearts and minds of your people. It means you are elevating power over the well-being of your people."

On its website, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan religious freedom watchdog, said Lai's imprisonment "inhibits religious freedom advocacy."