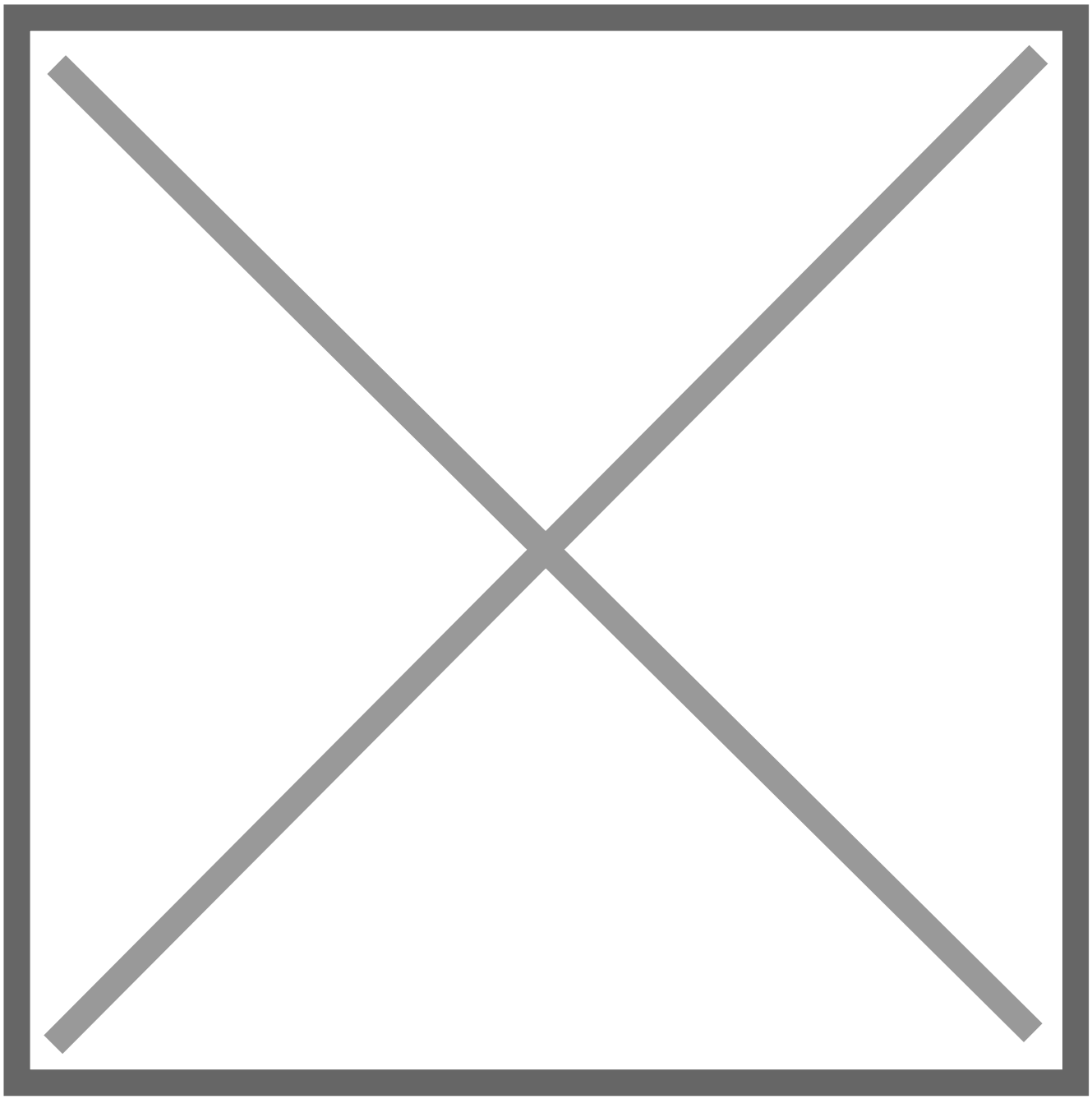
News



Chief Superintendent of the police force's National Security Department Steve Li Kwai-wah speaks at the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts building after the verdict in trial of Jimmy Lai, a prominent Hong Kong Catholic, philanthropist and media mogul. Three government-vetted judges found Lai, 78, guilty of conspiring with others to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiracy to publish seditious articles. He pleaded not guilty to all charges.(OSV News/Reuters/Lam Yik)

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Hong Kong — December 16, 2025
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Hong Kong's prominent Catholic, media tycoon and pro-democracy campaigner Jimmy Lai has been convicted of national security offenses under the city's controversial national security law.

Sebastien Lai, one of his children, said the family was saddened but not surprised by the verdict.

"In the 800-page verdict they have there is essentially nothing, nothing that incriminates him," he told reporters in London. "This is a perfect example of how the national security law has been molded and weaponized against someone who essentially said stuff that they didn't like," The Associated Press reported him saying Dec. 15.

"This verdict proves that the authorities still fear our father, even in his weakened state, for what he represents," Lai's daughter Claire said in a statement. "We stand by his innocence and condemn this miscarriage of justice," she said.

American theologian George Weigel told OSV News the outcome was a display of authoritarian power rather than justice.

"Everyone knew what the 'verdict' in this farce of a show trial would be," Weigel told OSV News Dec. 15, right after the news of the conviction broke.

"Even more disturbing were the comments by Hong Kong chief executive John Lee, the graduate of a Jesuit high school, who claimed that the verdict safeguarded 'Hong Kong's core values.' Which is, in a perverse sense, true: just like Stalin's show trials displayed his regime's 'core values,'" Weigel said, referring to Joseph Stalin, who for a quarter of a century dictatorially ruled the Soviet Union and whose rule led to the death of over 6 million people.

Lai is expected to be sentenced in early 2026, according to the BBC. His wife, Teresa Lai, was among the attendees of the reading of the verdict with one of their sons, Shun Yan, and Hong Kong's Cardinal Joseph Zen. Lai, 78, nodded to his family before being escorted out of the courtroom, AP said.

The verdict, which was 855 pages, was read by Judge Esther Toh, who said that Lai had extended a "constant invitation" to the U.S. to help bring down the Chinese government with the excuse of helping Hong Kongers, AP said.

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Meanwhile, on Dec. 14, Hong Kong's largest pro-democracy party has voted to disband after more than three decades of activism, with party veterans telling The Associated Press that some members had been warned of potential repercussions if the party failed to dissolve, adding to concerns about mounting pressure on opposition voices in Hong Kong.

For decades, Lai, who founded the now-defunct pro-democracy "Apple Daily," campaigned for freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Hong Kong, which was designated a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997, when British rule ended after more than 150 years. Hong Kong's Basic Law was supposed to allow the region "to exercise a high degree of autonomy and enjoy executive, legislative and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication.'

However, after a year of pro-democracy protests in 2019, China imposed the national security law -- under which Lai was arrested in August 2020 and has been imprisoned since December of that year. He has pleaded not guilty to two charges of conspiring to collude with foreign forces and one count of conspiring to publish

seditious materials. With the Dec. 15 conviction, he could face life in prison.

The Dec. 15 verdict "involves the paranoia of tyrants who are afraid of truth speakers," Weigel said.

In an earlier interview with OSV News, Weigel said that "Jimmy Lai is a nonviolent, deeply committed defender of not simply his rights to free speech, but to those of the people of Hong Kong, which were guaranteed in that agreement with Great Britain in 1997. Were he not to die in prison, that would be some sign that China is abiding, at least for the moment, by some of the commitments it made."

Lai refused to flee Hong Kong, citing his Catholic faith.

"If I go away, I not only give up my destiny, I give up God, I give up my religion, I give up what I believe in," said Lai during a 2020 interview posted on Napa Institute's YouTube channel.

The Biden administration's State Department, U.S. senators and Catholic bishops have since voiced support for Lai.

In November, reports spread that U.S. President Donald Trump appealed directly to China's Xi Jinping to free the jailed Hong Kong media tycoon when they met in South Korea Oct. 30.

"We don't know what the sentence is going to be, but the verdict was not a surprise," Weigel, who knows Lai personally and is a firm advocate of his release, told OSV News Dec. 15. "Let's see what happens with the interventions from President Trump and others. This man is a British citizen. It would be nice to hear from the British government publicly on this, but we don't know where this is going from here on."

Asked whether he's been in touch with the family since the news broke, Weigel, author of St. John Paul II's biography "Witness to Hope," said that he sent Lai's daughter, Claire, a text on Dec. 15 "and said I was praying for them and offering my morning Mass for them, and she wrote back and thanked me."

Teresa and Claire Lai met Pope Leo XIV after the general audience Oct. 15. Lai has been held in solitary confinement for around 1,770 days. "I don't want my father to die in jail," Lai's son Sebastien said.

In 2022, he wrote for The New York Sun that his father "is at peace for cleaving to the idea of freedom."

He said Lai "stayed in Hong Kong with the full knowledge of what the consequences could be."

In Stanley Prison in Hong Kong, he sketched religious art, including the crucifixion of Jesus displayed at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

In November, Weigel told OSV News: "This is not simply a stubborn guy who's taking on the government. This is a man who believes that his witness to human dignity and to basic human rights is an expression of his Catholic faith, and that he is suffering, for that is also an expression of that faith, and he accepts it in those terms."

"Lai's trial was one of the last unfinished national security prosecutions of Hong Kong's high profile activists, over their involvement in the 2019 protests," The Guardian wrote Dec. 15.

"Hundreds of activists, lawyers, and politicians have been pursued and jailed, or chased into exile. But few have captured global attention like Lai, whose life and career has developed in tangent with Hong Kong's sputtering walk towards democracy, and then its fall."