Opinion
NCR Voices



Jimmy Lai, a prominent Hong Kong Catholic, philanthropist and media mogul, is pictured in Hong Kong May 29, 2020. (OSV News/Reuters/Tyrone Siu)



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There was no surprise in the unjust verdict delivered by a Chinese court, which found Catholic philanthropist and media executive Jimmy Lai guilty of collusion with foreigners to endanger national security and conspiracy to publish seditious articles. Just a reminder of the evil at work in the world.

Lai's pro-democracy labors really are a threat to the Chinese regime which, like most totalitarian regimes, conflated the nation with itself. Lai did not threaten China: He threatened the tyrants who run the country. His show trial was not designed by the corrupt leaders to deliver justice. It was designed to intimidate others.

The power brokers in Beijing have violated all they promised Hong Kong residents in order to secure the colony's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Hong Kong was one of the last vestiges of the British Empire, but Lai would not have been convicted by any British court. Justice has to do with the ideology, the character of a regime and the intentions of leaders not with imperial status or lack thereof.

The Chinese government is not only afraid of Lai's politics. His Catholic faith rightly worried them. "Of course, Jimmy Lai's persecution is in part political. He is an outspoken proponent of democracy and human rights," said Stephen Schneck, commissioner and former chair, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, in an email interview. "Importantly, though, among those rights is his championing of religious freedom. Moreover, Lai roots his defense of democracy and rights in his faith. It must also be noted that Lai has intentionally been denied the Holy Eucharist during his detention. Clearly, his imprisonment by the Chinese regime reflects a denial of religious freedom."



A prison van believed to be carrying Jimmy Lai, leaves the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts building Dec. 15, 2025, after the verdict in the trial of 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)

USCIRF published an excellent fact sheet about the Chinese government's policy of "Sinicization" which requires all religions to conform to the dictates of the state. Our Catholic faith understands it must be inculturated wherever it finds itself, but that process entails an almost intimate dialogue between the faith and the culture. It can't be dictated by governmental fiat.

Catholicism is not the only religion that is persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP. The persecution of the Muslim Uyghurs is even worse. More than 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have been detained arbitrarily according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

"The Chinese Communist Party, and the Chinese state it controls, allows no quarter for any authority or right that is above itself," Schneck explained. "Yet, all religions fundamentally affirm a transcendent, divine authority beyond earthly regimes. With this, religions shape the formation of the human person — our morality and our understanding of who and why we are — in ways that can be fundamentally different from the tenets of the Chinese Communist Party. For these reasons, the Chinese regime is starkly suspicious of religion and sees religion as a danger to its ideology."

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This is a very important point. Religion qua religion is a threat to any government that aspires to dictatorial power precisely because it recognizes a transcendent authority. That transcendent authority relativizes all notions of power. Religion can only perform this essential cultural task if it is allowed to be religion, on its own terms. This is another reason those who want to see the church overly involved in politics are wrong: If the church becomes merely another actor in the political realm, it loses the ability to relativize all notions of power.

Religion does something else that threatens regimes like that run by the CCP: It strengthens and forms consciences. "Religious freedom is essentially freedom of conscience, and freedom of conscience is the foundation of all human rights. So, where religious freedom is in jeopardy then all human rights are at risk," Schneck told me. "And, where rights are at risk we find authoritarianism surging. If we're concerned about the tide of authoritarianism flooding the globe, it is vital to protect religious freedom. Indeed, working for religious freedom at this critical moment of history may be one of the most important things we can do."

Jimmy Lai will likely die in prison, a martyr to both democracy and Catholicism. In the late 18th century, Catholicism feared democracy which, in France and subsequently throughout Europe, was profoundly anti-clerical and anti-Catholic. A people with religious loyalty to a foreign figure, the pope, robbed both monarchs and parliaments of some of their power. In our day, the Catholic Church, and especially its insistence on human dignity, is a bulwark against the ambitions of tyrants. Catholics across the political spectrum should embrace religious liberty as the foundational right that it is. No one would want to live in a country where it is denied.

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