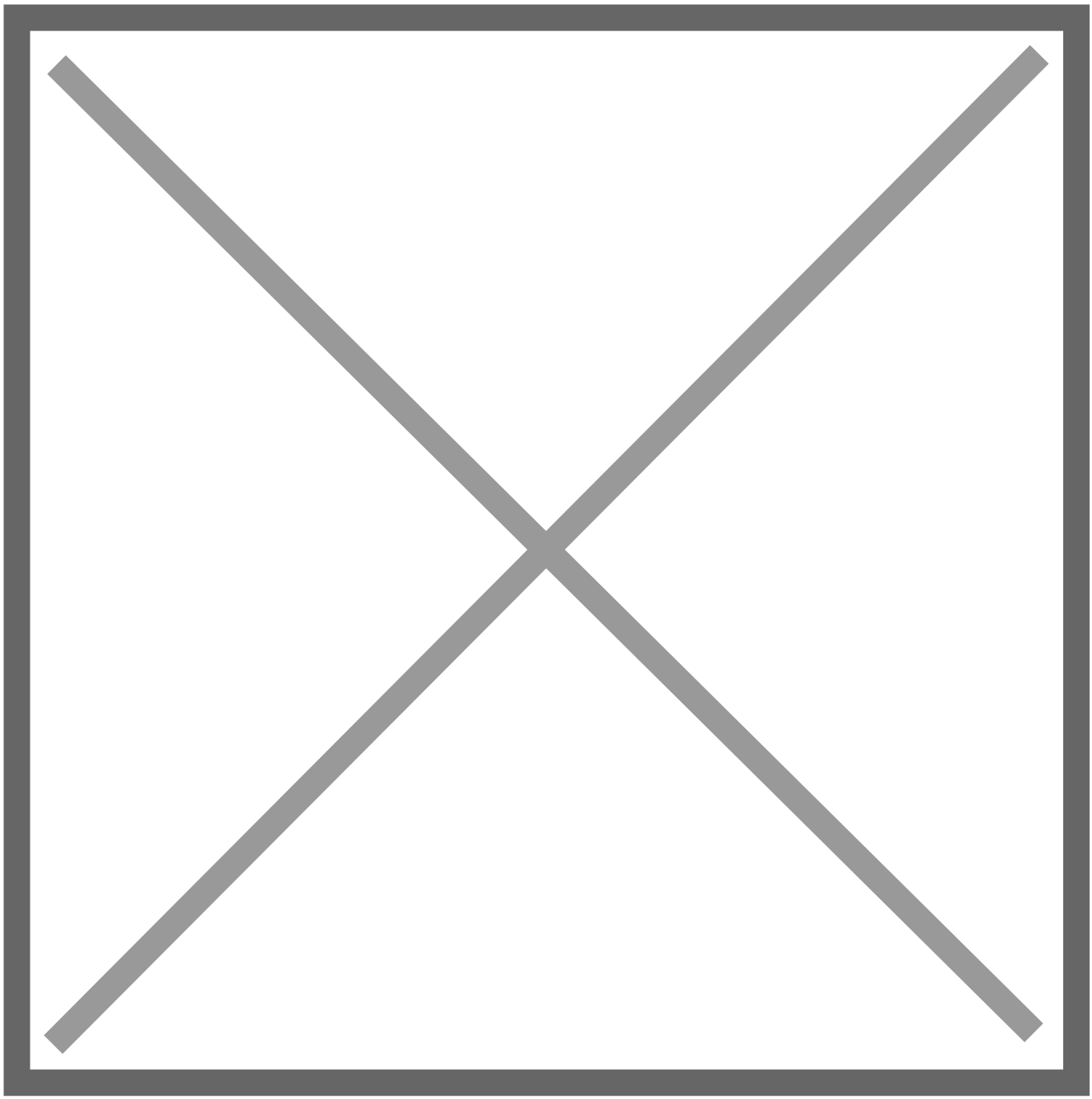
News



Catholic media mogul Jimmy Lai, founder of Apple Daily, leaves the Court of Final Appeal by prison van in Hong Kong Feb. 9, 2021. On Dec. 15, 2025, 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 had pleaded not guilty to all charges. On Feb. 9, 2026, Lai was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. (OSV News/Reuters/Tyrone Siu)

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Hong Kong — February 9, 2026
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Media entrepreneur and pro-democracy advocate Jimmy Lai, whose arrest nearly six years ago prompted outrage around the world, was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

A court in Hong Kong delivered its ruling Feb. 9, which is believed to be the harshest sentence imposed under China's so-called national security law, which criminalizes secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces.

The law has been criticized for its vagueness and its use in silencing dissent, curbing press freedoms and prosecuting opposition figures, like Lai, who was convicted of sedition and two charges of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces Dec. 15.

"Today is another dark day for justice," Lai's family said in a statement published shortly after the sentence was handed down.

"Sentencing my father to this draconian prison sentence is devastating for our family and life-threatening for my father," Lai's son, Sebastian, said. "It signifies the total destruction of the Hong Kong legal system and the end of justice. After more than five years of relentlessly persecuting my father, it is time for China to do the right thing and release him before it is too late."

Claire, Lai's daughter, called the 20-year imprisonment "a heartbreakingly cruel sentence."

"I have watched my father's health deteriorate dramatically, and the conditions he's kept in go from bad to worse. If this sentence is carried out, he will die a martyr behind bars," she said.

For decades, Lai, a British citizen 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.

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In the wake of the sentencing, U.K. Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper said the 20-year imprisonment was "an effective life sentence" and called his conviction "a politically motivated prosecution under a law that was imposed to silence China's critics."

"I again call on Hong Kong authorities to end his appalling ordeal and release him on humanitarian grounds, so that he may be reunited with his family," Cooper wrote Feb. 9 in a statement posted on X.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who visited China Jan. 28-31, was criticized for not doing enough to pursue Lai's release. According to BBC News, the U.K.'s All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arbitrary Detention and Hostage Affairs issued a statement saying that the failure to secure the British entrepreneur's release was "squandered by weak diplomacy."

"These opportunities will cost Jimmy Lai his life," the statement read.

However, Cooper said Starmer had raised Lai's case "directly with (Chinese President Xi Jinping) during his visit," which had "opened up discussion of our most acute concerns directly with the Chinese government at the highest levels."

"Following today's sentencing, we will rapidly engage further on Mr. Lai's case," she said.

The sentence was also condemned by Amnesty International, calling it "another grim milestone in Hong Kong's transformation from a city governed by the rule of law to one ruled by fear."

"With this ruling, we see yet again how Hong Kong's National Security Law is being used to distort fundamental freedoms into criminal acts," the human rights organization said. "Jimmy Lai's imprisonment is a cold-blooded attack on freedom of expression that epitomizes the systematic dismantling of rights that once defined Hong Kong."