

PRESS RELEASE
*** TUESDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2023 ***

Senior Catholic leaders sign petition calling for immediate release of Jimmy Lai

Senior Catholic leaders from around the world have signed a petition calling on the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) “to *immediately and unconditionally release*” pro-democracy advocate, Jimmy Lai.

Background

Jimmy Lai, aged 75, is a high-profile supporter of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, a writer, publisher, and owner of *Apple Daily*, once Hong Kong’s most popular independent Chinese-language newspaper, now forcibly closed by the authorities. Since 1990 when he launched his media company, with a pro-democracy and anti-corruption focus, the Chinese Communist Party and the Hong Kong SAR authorities have repeatedly targeted him. That targeting has intensified since the pro-democracy protests of 2019-2020.

Mr Lai has been in prison continuously since December 2020, following his arrest in August 2020. He was initially held on remand in pre-trial detention, and was then convicted and sentenced for participation in peaceful pro-democracy assemblies and a vigil marking the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre of 1989. He is currently serving a sentence in relation to a spurious fraud conviction, which has been widely condemned as an abuse of the law to silence dissent and freedom of speech. For example, the United States [condemned the conviction](#) and described the sentence as a “[grossly unjust outcome](#)” which “[b]y any objective measure... is neither fair nor just”.

Mr Lai is now awaiting trial for sedition and charges under the controversial National Security Law (NSL). His trial is currently scheduled to begin on 18th December 2023, after repeated delays. If convicted, he faces a potential life sentence for his peaceful pro-democracy campaigning and his work at *Apple Daily*. The NSL has been heavily criticised by many governments, international bodies and civil society organisations. The United Nations (UN) [human rights office](#) and UN [expert bodies](#) have repeatedly expressed concerns about the NSL, stating the broadly worded legislation can lead to “*discriminatory or arbitrary interpretation and enforcement which could undermine human rights protection*”. [Amnesty International](#) has called the NSL “*dangerously vague and broad*” with widely defined “*catch-all offences used in politically motivated prosecutions with potentially heavy penalties*.”

The Petition

Now, in the lead-up to Jimmy Lai’s NSL and sedition trial, ten senior Roman Catholic leaders from around the world have signed a petition calling for his immediate and unconditional release. The petition, signed by bishops representing dioceses and archdioceses across the US, India, Australia, Lithuania, Canada, UK, Ireland, and Nigeria, explains that “*Mr. Lai’s persecution for supporting pro-democracy causes [...] has gone on long enough*.” The senior Catholic leaders continue:

“There is no place for such cruelty and oppression in a territory that claims to uphold the rule of law and respect the right to freedom of expression. In standing up for his beliefs and committing himself through his faith to challenge autocracy and repression, Jimmy Lai has lost his business, been cut off from his family, and has just surpassed 1,000 days in prison, while facing the prospect of many more years of incarceration to come. He is 75 years old. He must be freed now.”

Commenting on the petition, **Sebastien Lai** said:

“I’m very grateful and honoured to see Catholics and Catholic leaders from around the world speaking out on my father’s behalf, and calling out for his release from unjust imprisonment. My father’s faith and belief in right and wrong are key to understanding why my father stood up for democracy for the people of Hong Kong, despite the obvious dangers to his life. Even now, imprisoned at 75 years old, his faith is what keeps him strong; it is something the Hong Kong authorities can’t take away from him, having taken away so much else.

I know that he would be very moved to know that people are now standing up for him and calling for his release. I know that with continued support, we will soon secure my father’s freedom.”

The ten signatories to the petition are:

- Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, Archbishop of New York (United States);
- Cardinal Baselios Cleemis Thottunkal, Major-Archbishop of Trivandrum (India);
- The Most Rev. Timothy P. Broglio, Archbishop for the Military Services-USA (United States);
- The Most Rev. Anthony Fisher. O.P., Archbishop of Sydney (Australia);
- The Most Rev. Gintaras Grušas, Archbishop of Vilnius (Lithuania);
- The Most Rev. J. Michael Miller, C.S.B, Archbishop of Vancouver (Canada);
- The Most Rev. John Wilson, Archbishop of Southwark (United Kingdom);
- The Most Rev. Robert E. Barron, Bishop of Winona-Rochester (United States);
- The Most Rev. Alan A. McGuckian, S.J., Bishop of Raphoe (Ireland);
- The Most Rev. Lucius Ugorji, Bishop of Umuahia (Nigeria).

Jimmy Lai and Sebastien Lai’s International Legal Team

In international law matters, Mr Jimmy Lai and Mr Sebastien Lai are represented by an international legal team led by [Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC](#), which includes [Jonathan Price](#), [Tatyana Eatwell](#), [Jennifer Robinson](#), and [Sarah Dobbie](#), barristers at Doughty Street Chambers.

Commenting on the petition, **Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC** added:

“Jimmy Lai is a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned due to his work as a peaceful pro-democracy campaigner, writer and media owner. The governments of the People’s Republic of China and the Hong Kong SAR have repeatedly attempted to silence him and stop his work: by prosecuting him for illegitimate reasons, under an illegitimate law, and in a legal system which is now profoundly unfair.

We express our deep gratitude to the ten senior Roman Catholic leaders who have spoken out in solidarity with Jimmy Lai and called for his immediate and unconditional release. They add their voices to many others, including United Nations experts, the European Parliament and the US Government. It is time for the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities to pay heed, and release Mr Lai before it is too late.”

For more background, see [here](#) and [here](#).

ENDS