

CHINESE COMMUNISTS PUNISH JIMMY LAI

Jimmy Lai, the 78-year-old British citizen and convert to Catholicism, was sentenced in Hong Kong on February 9 to twenty years in prison for protesting human rights abuses in China. He was accused of being the “mastermind” of protests against the Communist regime. He was arrested in 2020 under a new law that restricted freedom of the press, citing his “seditious” articles in *Apple Daily*, a newspaper he founded in 1995.

Chinese Communist chief Xi Jinping said the conviction has his “strong support.” But his voice was not echoed abroad.

Volker Türk, the chief human rights commissioner at the United Nations, said Lai was being punished for “exercising rights protected under international law.” Elaine Pearson, the Asia director for Human Rights Watch, said that trials like this send “a message to anyone who dares to criticize the Chinese Communist Party.”

Reporters Without Borders issued a statement saying, “Today the curtain falls on press freedom in Hong Kong.” The Committee to Protect Journalists maintained that “this egregious decision is the final nail in the coffin for freedom of the press in Hong Kong.”

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio called the sentence “an unjust and tragic conclusion to this case.” The European Union slammed what it called the “politically motivated prosecution of Jimmy Lai.” Many leaders in democratic nations, including Taiwan, voiced similar comments. Nathan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident who was imprisoned for his human rights protests, said Lai was an “heroic freedom fighter and my dear friend.”

The Vatican has said nothing.

It is not clear whether Pope Leo XIV will depart from Pope Francis' policy of appeasement with Communist China. Hong Kong Watch had accused Pope Francis of turning a blind eye to the oppression of Catholics in China, a sentiment shared by Cardinal Joseph Zen, former Bishop of Hong Kong.

In 2024, Ed Pentin, senior Rome correspondent for the *National Catholic Register*, said that unlike many other countries, "the Vatican has continued its silence on Lai's plight." Last year, Anne Hendershott, a sociology professor at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, wrote that Lai's tenuous condition "underscores the Vatican's failure to exercise meaningful leadership in defending justice—serving as a stark reminder of the Catholic Church's compromised role, with the Vatican retreating instead of defending Jimmy Lai...."

(Pentin and Hendershott serve on the Catholic League's board of advisors.)

Jimmy Lai became a human rights advocate after the Communists squashed the pro-democracy movement in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989. Appeals are now being made by influential heads of state to void his sentence. The Holy See should do the same.