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# Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai found guilty in landmark national security trial, faces possible life sentence

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Media tycoon and Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai in an interview in Hong Kong on July 1, 2020, ...



**Hong Kong** — Former Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai has been found guilty on two national security charges and a lesser sedition charge, in a landmark two-year trial widely viewed as a measure of the city's shrinking freedoms under Beijing's rule.

Self-made billionaire Lai, 78, is one of the highest-profile critics of Beijing charged under a **sweeping security law** imposed on the semi-autonomous city in 2020 following months of huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy protests.

He founded Apple Daily, a fiercely pro-democracy tabloid newspaper known for its blistering broadsides against the Chinese Communist Party until its forced closure in 2021.

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Lai had pleaded not guilty to all charges, and now faces possible life in prison. Monday's verdict marks the end of **a tumultuous legal saga** that had drawn condemnation from supporters and foreign leaders around the world, including US President Donald Trump – who had once vowed to “get him out.”

The imposition of the national security law has **transformed Hong Kong**, with authorities jailing dozens of political opponents, forcing civil society groups and outspoken media outlets to disband, and transforming the once-freewheeling city into one ruled by “patriots only.”

Hong Kong and China's leaders say it has “restored stability” following the 2019 protests.

## **‘Mastermind’ of conspiracies**



People wait outside the West Kowloon Law Courts Building in Hong Kong on December 14, 2025, ahead of Lai's verdict. (*Leung Man Hei/AFP/Getty Images*)

In delivering their verdict, judges said there was “no doubt that (Lai) had harbored his resentment and hatred of the PRC (People’s Republic of China) for many of his adult years.”

They pointed to Lai’s lobbying of US politicians during Trump’s first term – much of it before the security law was enacted – as evidence of sedition and colluding with foreign forces, including his meetings with then-Vice President Mike Pence, then-State Secretary Mike Pompeo, and attempts to meet Trump himself.

They also pointed to his WhatsApp messages with other pro-democracy activists and Apple Daily leaders, and a New York Times opinion piece he had written in May 2020 – in which he suggested ways to punish China for its repression of Hong Kong, such as revoking student visas for the children of government officials.

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His urging US officials to take actions against China in the name of helping the Hong Kong public “would be analogous to the situation where an American national asks for help from Russia to bring down the US Government under the guise of helping the State of California,” the judges said in their ruling.

“We are satisfied that (Lai) was the mastermind of the conspiracies” laid out in all three charges, they concluded. They added that the evidence showed Lai’s “only intent ... was to seek the downfall of the (Chinese Communist Party).”

The judges said they would announce the date of his sentencing at a later point. Collusion is punishable by life imprisonment under the security law.

The judges had earlier warned everyone inside to maintain “absolute silence” as their verdict was read out.

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Lai appeared calm throughout, greeting his wife and son at the start with a wave. He did not respond when the verdict came down but took off his glasses and wiped his face before he was led out of the courtroom.



Lai's children, Sebastien Lai (right) and Claire Lai (left), during a visit to the office of Agence France-Presse (AFP) in Washington, DC on December 2, 2025. *(Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images)*

Throughout his trial, prosecutors accused Lai of using his Apple Daily newspaper to call for sanctions against Hong Kong and China during the 2019 protests, and after the national security law was introduced.

He was arrested under the law in late 2020, and has spent more than 1,800 days in a maximum-security prison, much of it in solitary confinement. In 2022, he was sentenced to five years and nine months in prison on unrelated charges of fraud.

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Lai's supporters – many of whom had stood in line overnight to secure a seat inside the courtroom – expressed dismay but not surprise at the verdict, with many saying they no longer held faith in Hong Kong's judicial system.

“I've got no anticipation (that) Jimmy Lai will be released,” one woman told CNN, describing the city's transformation as “too sad.”

Another supporter said he, too, had held no hope for Lai's release, and described feeling numb to Beijing's crackdown on the city. But, he said, “We're still here ... You can't really arrest us all.”

Both supporters asked not to be named.

## From poor laborer to pro-democracy tycoon

Lai was born in mainland China and arrived in British-ruled Hong Kong at 12 years old, working his way up from factory laborer to clothing tycoon.

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He then pivoted to media and founded Apple Daily in 1995, two years before Hong Kong was handed over to China. The outspoken publisher and his

newspaper were at the forefront of the city's pro-democracy movement.

A vocal supporter of Trump, Lai traveled to Washington at the height of the 2019 protests, meeting with **Pence** and other US **politicians** to discuss the situation.

At the time, massive demonstrations sparked by a controversial piece of legislation were drawing hundreds of thousands onto the streets – many of whom feared that Beijing could encroach on the city's autonomy and rare freedoms of speech, press and assembly.

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Taking the stand in his own defense during the trial, Lai said he had never spoken with Trump.



Trump had raised Lai's case when he met Chinese leader Xi Jinping in South Korea in October, an administration official told CNN. The official added that Trump believes Lai should be released and wants to see that happen.

Hong Kong, a former British colony that returned to Chinese rule in 1997, has a separate judicial system to that of mainland China.

Lai is a British citizen, and the UK government has previously called for his release.

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Both the Chinese Embassy in Washington and the Hong Kong government have warned against "external forces" interfering with internal affairs and judicial process.

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Following Lai's conviction, China's foreign ministry said the central government "firmly supports (Hong Kong) in safeguarding national security and punishing crimes endangering national security in accordance with the law."

In a separate statement on Friday, responding to a US congressional committee report on China's human rights record, which included criticism of Lai's imprisonment and treatment, the Hong Kong government accused US officials of trying to "interfere with the judicial proceedings in (Hong Kong) by means of political power in order to procure a defendant's evasion of the criminal justice process."

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Critics fear the national security law has brought Beijing's authoritarian and opaque judicial norms to Hong Kong, with all national security trials so far heard by a panel of specially selected judges, not juries – a departure from the city's common-law tradition.

## Health concerns

The final stretch of the trial was marked by health concerns for Lai. His lawyers told the court that Lai had been experiencing palpitations and episodes of light-headedness; his son, Sebastien Lai, said at the time he was deeply concerned about his father's deteriorating health, including his old age and diabetes.

In an opinion piece in The Washington Post last Tuesday, his daughter Claire Lai wrote that “solitary confinement is taking its toll on his body,” and claimed the family had little knowledge what medical care he was receiving as no outside physicians were allowed to examine her father.

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In its statement on Friday, the Hong Kong government said Lai had received “adequate and comprehensive” medical services while in custody, and the prison had arranged “daily medical checkups” for Lai. There had been “no complaints at all regarding the medical services he was receiving,” it said.

It added that he had been placed in solitary confinement “at his own request.”

CNN's Samra Zulfaqr contributed to this report.



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