

COMMENTARY / WORLD

## Memo to Xi: There is no downside to freeing Jimmy Lai

The idea that he is a threat to the Chinese state is ridiculous



Sebastien Lai, son of jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai, poses for a portrait next to a poster featuring his father during an interview in London in December. | REUTERS

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Pressure to free imprisoned Hong Kong newspaperman Jimmy Lai continues to mount ahead of U.S. President Donald Trump's planned mid-May summit in Beijing.

Members of the U.S. Congress, including some of Trump's closest allies, have introduced bipartisan resolutions calling on him to secure Lai's humanitarian release during his trip to Beijing. The Senate resolution is led by Sens. Ted Cruz, a Republican from Texas, and Dick Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, and includes a diverse array of lawmakers from both parties. There is a similar resolution introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives that already has 30 co-sponsors.

Trump himself has repeatedly called for Lai's release. As far back as the 2024 presidential campaign he said it would be "very easy" to free Lai. He challenged Chinese President Xi Jinping to end Lai's continuing captivity at the Busan summit last October. He's also instructed Cabinet officials to make Lai's release a priority in trade talks.

Lai founded Hong Kong's popular pro-democracy Apple Daily newspaper and later expanded to Taiwan. The newspaper and Lai's Next magazine fought corruption and fought for economic and political freedom for a quarter-century. From the start, Lai knew he risked Communist Party ire. In February, three hand-picked judges sentenced him to 20 years in prison on trumped-up charges. His real crime was using his newspaper and his public profile to push for democracy.

Lai started his media business following the 1989 Tiananmen massacre in which Chinese authorities killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of their own citizens. He took British citizenship in the run-up to the 1997 handover of the colony to China. Over the next two decades, he built the world's largest and most influential independent Chinese-language media empire.

The 78-year-old Lai presents a dissident of a sort that China's communist rulers have never seen before. He's rich, his

newspapers gave him a powerful megaphone and he has a strong sense of right and wrong. Just as important, he's fearless. Lai took advantage of the lengthy, 155-day court proceedings in his national security law case to show the courtroom crowd of diplomats and journalists that he remains unbroken.

Lai is just one of many prisoners of conscience in China. The Senate resolution singles out four people held in mainland China: Pastor Ezra Jin, Pastor Gao Quanfu and his wife, Pang Yu, as well as Gulshan Abbas, sister of an exiled Uyghur activist living in the United States.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer also pressed for Lai's release during his visit to Beijing in January. His national security adviser, Jonathan Powell, underscored the need to release Lai during a follow-up visit in March. British parliamentarians have added to the chorus, stressing that warm relations with Beijing depend on Lai's release. The Group of Seven finance ministers issued a statement last summer urging Lai's release. The European Union, Australia and Taiwan have condemned his detention.

China fears Lai. It claims — and some of its officials may actually believe — that Lai is a "black hand" puppet master responsible for bringing some 2 million Hong Kongers out in the streets during a months-long wave of 2019 pro-democracy protests.

Lai has no political ambitions. He is not an Alexei Navalny or Nelson Mandela in the making. He is a businessman. He is 78 years old and in poor health. He has suffered in solitary confinement for most of the almost 2,000 days that he has been in prison. Chinese officials broke up his media empire. The idea that he is a threat to the Chinese state is ridiculous. It suggests either paranoia on the part of the country's leadership or that the Chinese Communist Party's rule is much more fragile than we know.

Beijing could realize that Jimmy Lai is more trouble in prison than outside. Releasing him would remove a major irritant. That would allow China to move toward its goal of stabilizing relations with the U.S.

It won't be Trump or Starmer who makes the decision to release Lai. That will be up to Xi. He should consider the cost of continuing to keep Jimmy Lai in prison. If Lai dies in jail, it will be a permanent blot on China's international reputation. Tragically, there is a precedent: Chinese writer and activist [Liu Xiaobo](#) won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize but died in Chinese custody seven years later.

Further, it is expected that — absent any progress from the Chinese government to free Lai and other political prisoners — more punitive measures could move forward by the Trump administration and the U.S. Congress to shut down the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices in the U.S., impose additional sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials and designate Hong Kong a primary money laundering center under U.S. law.

China claims that it is dedicated to upholding an international rules-based order. Its crackdown on Hong Kong since the 2020 imposition of a vague and sweeping National Security Law challenges that claim. The law denies jury trials and relies on hand-picked judges to convict virtually every defendant. China has also violated the Sino-British Joint Declaration, the international treaty it signed as part of the 1997 handover.

China finds it difficult to have it both ways — continuing a harsh crackdown that has denied Hong Kong people their promised freedoms while claiming to be a responsible global player.

Lai's case is about more than one man. It is a test of the international community's ability to respond to the steady narrowing of freedoms in one of Asia's most important cities. It is also a measure of China's willingness to balance control with pragmatism.

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#### KEYWORDS

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