

# Hong Kong tycoon Jimmy Lai's health is declining as verdict nears, family says

The media mogul's children are pushing the White House and U.K. government to press for his release after 1,800 days behind bars.

December 5, 2025



By [Cate Cadell](#)

The children of imprisoned Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai — one of the most high-profile figures charged after Beijing's 2020 overhaul of the city's legal system — say his health continues to deteriorate since his trial ended in August and are pushing U.S. and U.K. authorities to secure his release before a looming verdict that could impose a de facto death sentence.

Dozens of U.S. lawmakers have issued a bipartisan call for Lai's release, and President Donald Trump has reportedly raised the case with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. But the issue remains delicate as Trump seeks to preserve a fragile détente with Beijing, and Lai has become a high-profile symbol in the Chinese authorities' sweeping effort to erode Hong Kong's autonomy.

Lai — the 77 year-old former publisher of the Hong Kong-based news outlet Apple Daily — was imprisoned in 2020 after Beijing imposed a hard-line national security law allowing authorities to charge activists and other pro-democracy figures with offenses deemed seditious to the central government. The law effectively silenced independent media, including Apple Daily, which had reported openly on the legislation that brought millions of Hong Kongers into the streets in protest in 2019 and 2020.

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Lai's children say his health deteriorated sharply over the course of his 160-day trial, which ended in August, noting he has lost significant weight, is experiencing heart problems and is not receiving proper medical care in detention. His daughter, Claire Lai, was able to visit him in prison before she left Hong Kong to advocate for him abroad. She says she is unable to return now because of concerns that meetings with foreign lawmakers and other advocates could result in her facing similar charges as her father.

Hong Kong's judicial independence has been steadily eroded under Beijing's influence, and every person tried under the national security law has been convicted. If found guilty, Lai could spend the rest of his life in prison.

"He's lost over 10 kilos. His nails are turning certain colors ... and some of them are falling off. His teeth are rotting. He has infections that last weeks and months ... some of his limbs get swollen and red and just agonizingly painful," Claire Lai said in an interview with The Washington Post.

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Concerns over Lai's health temporarily delayed August trial proceedings, which continued after he was issued a heart monitor.

Hong Kong authorities deny that Lai — a British national — is being mistreated and accuse his advocates of trying to “smear” the government. “[Lai] has all along been receiving appropriate treatment and care in prison. The false reports by relevant media have no factual basis at all,” the government said in [a statement](#) Wednesday.

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Lai's international legal team is hoping that Trump and U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer will raise Lai's case and push for his release. Both leaders are expected to visit China in the coming months, and Beijing has said that its internal national security cases are not subject to negotiation.

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However, the twin trips could also serve as useful diplomatic leverage for securing Lai's release. No date has been set for the verdict; a Hong Kong judge has said only that it will be delivered "in good time." Lai's children, looking to past cases, think it could come in January, though the high-profile trial has defied typical timelines.

In recent interactions with Beijing, Trump has broadly avoided airing contentious issues such as human rights and the futures of Taiwan and Hong Kong, focusing instead on trade. However, according to a [report by Reuters](#), he did raise concerns with Xi during their first face-to-face meeting of Trump's second term, held in South Korea in October.


Before that meeting, there had been growing bipartisan support among lawmakers pushing Trump to raise the issue, including a [letter from more than 30 bipartisan lawmakers](#) led by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman James E. Risch (R-Idaho) and Sen. Rick Scott (R-Florida).

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"I have a lot of respect for Rick Scott and a lot of them that are asking me to do that, and it's on my list, I'm going to ask ... we'll see what happens," Trump [told reporters](#) ahead of the South Korea meeting.

Starmer has also raised Lai's incarceration in meetings with Xi, and has said that his release is a priority for the British government. The U.K. leader is expected to visit China in the new year, amid broader efforts to stabilize British relations with Beijing and controversies over the [construction of a supersized Chinese embassy](#) in the heart of London and [allegations by MI5 of Chinese spying](#).

Despite broad support in the United States and Britain for Lai's release, the issue remains sensitive for Beijing, which has charged the former media mogul with colluding with foreign forces. Prosecutors pointed to his participation in a Tiananmen remembrance event, meetings with U.S. officials and Apple Daily's advocacy for sanctions as evidence of sedition. Many of the cited incidents predate the national security law, but the sweeping legislation allows for retroactive charges.

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Lai — a diabetic who has been held in solitary confinement for the entirety of his almost five-year imprisonment — has denied he ever sought Hong Kong's independence from the mainland, and said the Apple Daily was upholding principles of democracy, freedom of speech and rule of law.

Hong Kong was handed back to China by Britain in 1997 under an agreement that the city would retain its autonomy, capitalist system and freedoms for 50 years. The 2020 national security law hastened the demise of that framework, and Britain withdrew its remaining judges from Hong Kong's legal system in 2022, citing the “systematic erosion of liberty and democracy in Hong Kong.”

Unlike many facing potential charges under the 2020 national security law, Lai refused to flee Hong Kong. Rights groups say local authorities are using his case to set an example for other pro-democracy activists in a city whose independence and international standing has been rapidly eroded under the legislation.

“He’s already been in there for five years. His health is rapidly failing. So that’s a very easy thing for Hong Kong to do, to not only raise their reputation, but also mend their legal system and to mend their competitive advantage as a financial center,” Lai’s son, Sebastien Lai, told The Post.

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