



Anand, MPs voice disappointment over Jimmy Lai's 20-year sentence

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Media mogul Jimmy Lai Chee-ying, pictured in 2020 on his way to court in Hong Kong, was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

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Foreign Affairs Minister Anita Anand says Canada is disappointed by the sentencing of Hong Kong media mogul Jimmy Lai to 20 years in prison on Monday and is urging his immediate release on humanitarian grounds.

She joined Canadian MPs, press-freedom advocates, international politicians and human-rights groups in denouncing the sentence imposed on the 78-year-old founder of the now-shuttered pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily.

Mr. Lai was arrested in Hong Kong in 2020 and accused of sedition and colluding with foreign forces to undermine Chinese rule in the territory. He has spent five years in solitary confinement, according to his legal team.

He has close family in Ontario and extensive business investments in the Niagara region, among them a string of hotels.

His niece Erica Lepp, who lives in Niagara-on-the-Lake, said she and her family were devastated by the sentence and are experiencing a “form of grieving.” Ms. Lepp’s mother is Mr. Lai’s twin sister.

“At 78, 20 years is the same as a life sentence, especially with his deteriorating health and his diabetes,” she said Monday. “It was heartbreaking last night when we got the news.”

VIDEO 0:50

A fierce critic of Beijing, Mr. Lai was the founder of the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, which was shuttered for national security reasons.

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Human-rights advocates and MPs from across the political spectrum have argued that the Hong Kong businessman, who is a British citizen but spent a lot of time in Canada before his arrest, deserves to be granted honorary Canadian citizenship.

Prime Minister Mark Carney joined British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and U.S. President Donald Trump in calling for hi to be freed last year.

In a social-media post on Monday, Ms. Anand said: “Mr. Lai is 78 years old and in poor health and we call for his immediate humanitarian release. Canada will continue to support free and independent media worldwide.”

Mr. Lai was a prominent critic of the Chinese Communist Party before his arrest under a Beijing-imposed national security law, part of a wider crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong, a former British colony that was known for press freedom. He pleaded not guilty to all charges.

His international legal team has raised grave doubts that he will receive proper medical treatment in prison, citing examples of diabetic prisoners who have died behind bars in Hong Kong.

“Jimmy Lai’s sentencing is draconian even by authoritarian standards, and akin to a death sentence for a 78-year-old diabetic in ailing health,” said Brandon Silver, Mr. Lai’s Canadian counsel and director of policy and projects at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights. “It is the culmination of a trial universally condemned as unfair. Mr. Lai should be released immediately.”

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NDP MP Jenny Kwan, who was born in Hong Kong, described Mr. Lai’s sentence as “another devastating escalation in the systematic dismantling of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong.”

“Mr. Lai is not a criminal – he is a prisoner of conscience whose only ‘offence’ has been standing up for democracy, freedom of the press, and the rule of law,” she said in a statement.

Scott Griffen, executive director of the International Press Institute, which named Mr. Lai a World Press Freedom Hero last year, said in a statement that the sentence “shows the lengths Chinese authorities will go to stifle press freedom and democracy in Hong Kong.”

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio also joined the chorus of public figures calling for Mr. Lai’s release.

“The Hong Kong High Court’s decision to sentence Jimmy Lai to 20 years is an unjust and tragic conclusion to this case. It shows the world that Beijing will go to extraordinary lengths to silence those who advocate fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, casting aside the international commitments Beijing made in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration,” he said in a statement on Monday.

“After enduring a trial lasting two years, and detention in prison for more than five, Mr. Lai and his family have suffered enough. The United States urges the authorities to grant Mr. Lai humanitarian parole.”

Anita Anand  X
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On Monday, Bloc Québécois MP Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe joined his party leader, Yves-François Blanchet, in denouncing the court decision, saying on social media that Mr. Lai's "sole crime is to fight for liberty and democracy."

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe is a vice-chair of the Commons committee on international human rights, which on Monday unanimously passed a motion calling for Mr. Lai's immediate release.

Liberal MP Judy Sgro, who has spearheaded efforts in Parliament to award Mr. Lai honorary Canadian citizenship, said in a statement that “the sentencing of a 78-year-old publisher to 20 years in prison for peaceful expression is not the legitimate application of the rule of law – it is repression.”

She added that she would continue to advocate for Mr. Lai’s release “along with all those imprisoned in Hong Kong for their beliefs and peaceful advocacy.”

During Question Period, Michael Chong, the Conservative foreign affairs critic, said Mr. Lai was sentenced to prison “simply for exercising his rights and freedoms of the press, of speech, of assembly, of association.”

Ms. Anand, who has visited China twice as Foreign Affairs Minister, replied that, “While in Beijing, I reiterated Canada’s long-standing position to my counterpart that the persecution of journalists, of media workers, of activists, is unacceptable.”

She most recently travelled to Beijing with the Prime Minister in January for talks designed to strengthen Canada’s trade ties with China.

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