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CHINAFILE

A Growing Movement to Support Liu Xiaobo

By Jared Genser

On December 10, 2010, a Nobel Peace Prize was quietly placed on the seat of an empty blue chair in Oslo in honor of its absent recipient, Dr. Liu Xiaobo. At the time, Dr. Liu sat in a prison cell while his wife, Liu Xia, was prevented from leaving home to attend the ceremony. I had the honor of sitting in the front row of the Oslo City Hall that extraordinary day as their lawyer. Though their circumstances remain virtually unchanged, an international movement to free them is gaining momentum.

By now, the story of Dr. Liu is well known. In 2008, authorities sentenced the literature professor turned democracy activist to 11 years in prison on charges of "inciting subversion." His only crime, as the government readily admitted at trial, was the production of online essays and a political manifesto known as Charter '08, which called for peaceful democratic reform and respect for fundamental human rights in China. It was precisely this work -- which is clearly protected under international law -- that the Norwegian Nobel Committee cited in awarding the 2010 Peace Prize to Dr. Liu. While few expected the government to allow Dr. Liu to accept the award himself, its response to the Prize was truly shocking. In addition to thinly veiled threats aimed at other capitols and attempts to block coverage of the award in China, the government placed Liu Xia under house arrest without even the pretense of due process.

Like the detention of Dr. Liu and Liu Xia, the government's tired claims about their cases remain unchanged: the government respects the "rule of law," Dr. Liu is a "criminal," and no legal action has been taken against Liu Xia. Of course, such claims are made despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary. Just this week, the *Associated Press* managed to reach Liu Xia in her home where she described the painful conditions of her confinement. Frequently unable to leave bed due to a back injury, she told reporters, "I felt I was a person emotionally prepared to respond to the consequences of Liu Xiaobo winning the prize. But after he won the prize, I never really imagined that after he won, I would not be able to leave my home. I think Kafka could not have written anything more absurd and unbelievable than this."

Despite the government's intransigence, there is reason to hope; an international movement to free the Lius is gathering both cohesion and momentum. Last week, the International Committee for Liu Xiaobo, a coalition composed of six Nobel Peace Prize winners and 15 non-governmental organizations, released a letter signed by 134 Nobel Laureates calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Dr. Liu and Liu Xia. Importantly, the initiative led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Peace 1984) and Sir Richard Roberts (Medicine 1993) garnered not just the support of Dr. Liu's fellow Peace Prize Laureates, but the support of Laureates from across all six Nobel disciplines. This broad support is a reflection of the fact that internationally-protected human rights are universal and that such rights don't stop at national borders -- even China's.

This kind of collaboration in itself is an important milestone. As we learned during the campaign to free Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, the challenge of high profile cases is that they are often all force and no vector, leading to parallel, conflicting, and uncoordinated campaigns. We also learned that overcoming that hurdle is just the first step and that we must also build broad support among the grass roots.

To this end, Archbishop Tutu is leading efforts to build a citizen movement in support of Dr. Liu and Liu Xia. Last week, he invited citizens of the world to join the movement with the launch of a [Change.org petition](#) that mirrors the Nobel Laureate letter. In less than 48 hours, the petition passed 200,000 signatures representing 82 countries, and it continues to gather support.

As we remember the 2010 Nobel Prize ceremony and the now iconic empty chair highlighting the Laureate's absence, we must continue to grow our diverse and coordinated international coalition to demand the immediate release of Liu Xiaobo, the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and his wife, Liu Xia.

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