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The Obama-Xi State Visit: Any Room for Human Rights?

The agenda is packed, but human rights issues are likely to get short shrift

By Jared Genser

With Chinese President Xi Jinping arriving in Washington tomorrow to meet U.S. President Barack Obama, most of the news analysis has focused on the impact of China's slowing economy, cyber espionage, trade, and flare-ups in the South China Sea. But China's relentless disregard for the human dignity of the Chinese people must central to their discussions when Obama meets with Xi later this week.

With a domestic security budget estimated at over \$130 billion, Xi and the Chinese security state obstructs Chinese citizens' exercise of free speech, association, and religion. And it persecutes religious minorities, harasses and silences human rights defenders, and blocks the efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at every turn. But major world powers have been unwilling to confront China on these issues and to challenge Xi's repressive actions. During Xi's upcoming visit to Washington, Obama must speak up and speak loudly.

The recent arrest of more than 250 human rights lawyers highlights Xi's repressive agenda. Recent reports indicate that 22 remain in custody, either in criminal detention or in unknown locations. The government's alleged suspicions of these lawyers range from "illegally organizing paid protests" and "fabricating rumors on the internet to sway court decisions" to the more grave allegation of "inciting subversion of State power."

The crackdown began with the detention of Wang Yu, an attorney at the Beijing-based Fengrui law firm. Wang has worked on human rights cases since 2011. She worked on the cases of the "Five Feminists" detained earlier this year, the respected Uighur academic Ilham Tohti, six underage girls sexually assaulted by their headmaster, and members of the banned spiritual group Falun Gong. Wang also represented Cao Shunli, a human rights activist who died last year while serving a sentence she received in response to her attempt to engage with the UN Human Rights Council. The government denied the imprisoned activist adequate medical attention until just days before her death.

After this summer's crackdown on rights lawyers, state-run media accused them of "play[ing] an inglorious role as accessories to wrecking the rule of law and disturbing social order." But in reality, the women and men targeted in this attack work to ensure respect for human rights and rule of law.

Previously, rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng was convicted of “inciting subversion.” While in jail or in various terms of enforced disappearances, he faced atrocious treatment including deprivation of light, food, and human contact for years at a time, and he was repeatedly tortured. Even though he was technically “released” from prison just over one year ago to live with his brother in rural China, Gao is restricted to a small village, has no access to desperately needed medical and dental care, and has been denied the ability to be reunited with his family in the United States.

The plight of these lawyers is merely a symptom of an extraordinary problem. Xi and the Chinese Communist Party wants to silence those who disagree with them and terrorize those who speak out against him. As the economy slows and Xi feels compelled to tighten his grip on power, he cements the disturbing reality of modern-day China. Xi leads a repressive Chinese government that persistently deprives its people of their dignity all across his country.

In Tibet, China’s repressive tactics were recently highlighted after the death in custody of Tibetan Monk Delek Rinpoche. When more than 1,000 mourners gathered and also urged the release of his body, Chinese forces fired live rounds into the air and tear gas into the crowd.

The Uighurs of Xinjiang in western China face constant harassment and many have tried to flee the country. The Chinese government characterizes the Uighurs as terrorists motivated by religious extremism, but Human Rights Watch has said the Chinese government “is directing a crushing campaign of religious repression” against them “in the name of anti-separatism and counter-terrorism.” Most recently, China convinced Thailand to send over 100 Uighurs back into the hands of the Chinese government.

In the eastern province of Zhejiang, Chinese authorities imposed strict religious controls and have been “forcibly demolishing visible crosses from places of worship.” Through such actions, Xi has shown a flagrant disregard for the freedom of religion.

And in Hong Kong, pro-democracy protestors filled the streets after Xi’s administration announced last year that it would effectively eliminate the democratic process in Hong Kong. After dialogue between authorities and protest leaders failed, some leaders undertook peaceful hunger strikes. Chinese authorities responded with pepper spray, tear gas, and brute force.

The Chinese government has been equally vicious in its repression of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association. The vague language and harsh punishments contained in the draft Overseas NGO Management Law reveal that the true intention behind that legislation is to institutionalize intimidation of NGOs – yet another attempt to silence free expression and inhibit free association.

This repression of civil society is, of course, nothing new. Liu Xiaobo, 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and co-author of Charter 08, is currently serving a prison sentence for “inciting subversion” – in other words, for exercising his right to freedom of expression in promoting peaceful, democratic reform. His wife Liu Xia has been held under de facto house arrest for nearly five years while her physical and mental health deteriorate. Many fear Liu Xia is in

danger of facing the same fate as Cao Shunli. Today a group of 12 Nobel Peace Laureates released a letter sent to the U.S. president and fellow Nobel Peace Laureates on September 2, urging he call publicly for the release of both Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia. While Obama has called for Liu Xiaobo's release on several occasions, no one at the White House has ever publicly called for her freedom.

And now, Beijing is gearing up to host another Olympic Games, and we must not forget the human rights abuses and increased repression surrounding the 2008 Olympics hosted by Beijing. China censored dissent, threatened and harassed reporters, banned protests, and carried out forced evictions. This was all in spite of making a commitment to the International Olympic Committee to uphold human rights.

Unless Xi respects the human rights of his citizens and upholds human rights and rule of law, his government is unsustainable. Yet Xi refuses to acknowledge human dignity as relevant to how he and the Communist Party governs the nearly 1.4 billion people in China. He is equally unwilling to discuss human rights when meeting with world leaders. Instead, he presents the world with a false choice: Engage on the issues he handpicks, or do not engage at all. But Obama can – and must – stand up to Xi and insist on genuine human rights dialogue.

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