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Democracy Dies in Darkness

DemocracyPost

Dear President Trump: Please let Liu Xiaobo die as a free man

June 27, 2017



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On Monday, China released Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo from prison on parole, after he was diagnosed as being in the final stages of liver cancer. He is being treated at a hospital in the northeastern city of Shenyang, but he has asked Chinese authorities to let him travel to the United States with his wife, Liu Xia, for medical treatment. President Trump should immediately urge Chinese President Xi Jinping to grant Liu's request on humanitarian grounds.

It is incredibly disturbing that the Chinese government failed to diagnose its most famous political prisoner as having cancer until it was too late for meaningful treatment. Liu Xiaobo is a scholar and democracy activist who was imprisoned primarily for his role in drafting Charter 08, a political manifesto that called for greater rule of law, respect for human rights and an end to one-party rule in China. He was detained two days before the public release of Charter 08, and in December 2009, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power."

On Oct. 8, 2010, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that Liu was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Within two weeks, Liu Xia was placed under house arrest and has been held without charge or trial for almost seven years.

Liu Xiaobo's imprisonment coincided with China's rise as a global power on the world stage. In recent years, China has raised its military budget past a record high of \$145 billion annually and vigorously contested competing claims in the South China Sea. In its "One Belt, One Road Initiative," China is investing hundreds of billions of dollars into infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa and Europe. And it has created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, whose 57 members have contributed more than \$100 billion, making it half the size of its rival World Bank. It has also positioned itself to be a key interlocutor with difficult states such as Iran and North Korea.

At home, however, Xi has faced serious economic and environmental challenges, as best highlighted by an extraordinary rise in domestic dissent. In response, Xi has unabashedly increased repression of religious and ethnic minorities, human rights lawyers and civil society activists; China reportedly now spends more than \$120 billion annually on domestic security.

As China's power and influence have increased, Western democracies have collectively engaged in self-censorship on human rights, choosing to prioritize what they have clearly believed to be their more important interests over their purported values. In the past five years, since Xi became president, discussions on human rights have been relegated to fruitless dialogues with the Chinese foreign ministry, which has never had any power over domestic concerns.

President Barack Obama led the West in playing down concerns with China on human rights and was conspicuous by his unwillingness to help Liu, his fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He raised Liu Xiaobo's case publicly only once after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and whatever he might have said privately clearly had no impact. At the same time, he did not join 134 Nobel laureates on a letter to Xi, did not publicly condemn Liu Xia's detention under house arrest and even threatened to veto a bill, passed by the Senate, to rename the street in front of the Chinese Embassy "Liu Xiaobo Plaza."

Chinese security officials even exploited the United States' repeated refusal to help the Lius in torture sessions with detained Chinese dissidents. They explained to their victims that they surely must have observed that Washington had refused to help the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate and his wife — so what hope could they expect if they were to be disappeared, tortured or imprisoned? The American refusal of support to the Lius gave Xi license to act with total impunity to repress domestic dissent.

Much as that unknown protester stood in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square, Liu Xiaobo volunteered to be the first signatory of Charter 08, knowing that by symbolizing the Chinese people's demands for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, he would pose a singular threat to the one-party system. For that courageous stand, he paid with his and his wife's freedom, and he is about to pay with his life. Now is the time for Trump and the United States to honor his sacrifice and his dying wishes and to implore Chinese authorities to allow him to obtain medical treatment here and live out his remaining days in freedom.