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Trump Must Keep China Honest on Human Rights, Starting with Nobel Laureate

Three Ways the Trump Administration Can Continue Reversing Obama's Failed Strategy in Venezuela.

By Jared Genser

With China's economic and political rise, the United States has abandoned serious efforts to press President Xi Jinping to relent on the widespread human rights abuses of his citizens. This is a dramatic strategic error that should be reversed by President Trump.

The Chinese Communist Party, which comprises some 90 million members, maintains an iron grip on power, ruling a country with a population of more than 1.4 billion. The government lives in profound fear of its own population spending well over \$120 billion annually on domestic security.

Those who dare to speak out face imprisonment, disappearance, torture, and even death. The Chinese people, however, are desperate for a voice in their own future. Their resilience is remarkable. Despite the risks, there are more than 150,000 protests annually.

It is only by the world strongly confronting China on rights abuses and changing the government's behavior, however, that more people will have the courage to speak out. As a start, it is crucial to secure the release of the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo and his wife, Liu Xia. Today, a group of 10 of his fellow Peace Laureates, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Jody Williams have urged Xi to release them, but much more is needed.

Liu Xiaobo is a Chinese scholar and dissident who was sentenced to 11 years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power” in December 2009 for his role in drafting Charter 08, a manifesto for transforming China to a multi-party democracy. Shortly after being announced as a recipient of the 2010 Peace Prize, Liu’s wife was placed under house arrest, where she has been held without charge or trial ever since. China has brazenly claimed she is under “no legal restriction.”

In 2011, the United Nations found both Lius were being detained in violation of international law and urged their immediate release. But they remain imprisoned because their release has not been a priority for the United States or other Western democracies.

During his time in office, President Obama repeatedly dodged opportunities to confront China publicly on Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia’s detentions, despite being a Nobel Peace Prize laureate himself. He declined to join a letter from 134 Nobel laureates to Xi.

Obama never challenged China’s outrageous claim Liu Xia was not under house arrest or called for her release. And he even threatened to veto a bill that passed the U.S. Senate to rename the street in front of the Chinese Embassy Liu Xiaobo Plaza. These decisions were a license to Xi to treat the Lius with impunity.

In running for President, Donald Trump was very blunt in describing what he saw as the threat China posed to the United States. He attacked its trade policies, accused China of stealing American jobs, threatened to label it a currency manipulator, and blamed it for a pair of massive hacks into U.S. government databases. Later, he provoked the Chinese government by taking a call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen.

It is one thing to talk tough. It is another to take strong actions that lead to results. The Lius need Trump to act. Here’s what he should do:

First, he should call publicly on Xi to immediately release Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia, saying their freedom will be a top priority of his Administration. He should send his new Ambassador to China, Terry Bransted, when he is confirmed by the Senate, to try and visit Liu Xia in her Beijing apartment, where he will inevitably be turned away as has happened to other ambassadors.

Second, Trump should urge the Congress to act rapidly to adopt the bill to rename the street in front of the Chinese Embassy Liu Xiaobo Plaza. This legislation would follow in the bipartisan tradition of a bill adopted by the Congress in 1984 and signed into law by President Reagan renaming the street in front of the Soviet Embassy for Andrei Sakharov, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975.

And finally, Trump should reach out to British Prime Minister Theresa May and French President Francois Hollande so they can work together for Lius’ freedom. In recent years, the Chinese government has only relented on individual cases when multiple governments and civil society groups acted together.

On the day Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years in prison, he said “I have long been aware that when an independent intellectual stands up to an autocratic state, step one towards freedom is often a step into prison. Now I am taking that step; and true freedom is that much nearer.”

Securing Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia's release would provide extraordinary hope and inspiration for so many in China who yearn to be free.

Jared Genser is founder of Freedom Now and is pro bono counsel to Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia.