

On his 55th Birthday, Liu Xiaobo is not Alone

Rt. Honorable Kim Campbell*

As the year 2010 draws to a close, one story that is sure to make it to the top of the biggest stories count-down is the choice of Liu Xiaobo for the Nobel Peace Prize for “his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China,” as the Norwegian Nobel Committee stated. We all know that neither Mr. Liu nor his wife were permitted by the Chinese government to attend the presentation of the Prize and that he remains behind bars in a Chinese prison on this, his 55th Birthday. The Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy, a global network of activists, practitioners, donors, scholars, and others engaged in advancing democracy, extends its heartfelt greetings to him on this special day.

We also want to assure Mr. Liu that while he may be alone in his prison cell, he is far from alone in the world. Beginning well before his nomination for the Nobel Prize, and especially since his egregious arrest in 2008, people of all races, religions, and nationalities have been celebrating his work and expressing solidarity with him, and he has no doubt provided profound inspiration to thousands worldwide. In this way, while Mr. Liu is paying a price for his work, the world is reaping a harvest of renewed determination and courage to oppose tyranny and to build and strengthen democratic societies. We are certain he knows of this great company he keeps, and we hope it adds to the fortitude for which he has long been recognized.

On the other hand, we lament that Mr. Liu is not alone in another sense: We are reminded by his imprisonment of the thousands of individuals like him who suffer and will continue to suffer the same, and in some cases even worse, fates. Human rights defenders and democracy activists in more countries than we would wish to count have been forced into exile, imprisoned, attacked, or murdered. But while their courage and determination are on the rise, so, too, are the challenges. In fact, the recently published 2010 Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index has confirmed what many of us already know all too well: democracy has in fact declined around the world and worse. “The decades-long global trend in democratization had previously come to a halt,” according to the Index report; “now democracy is in retreat. The dominant pattern in all regions over the past two years has been backsliding on previously attained progress in democratization.” Translated into human terms, “[s]ome 2.5bn people, more than one-third of the world's population, still live under authoritarian rule (with a large share being, of course, in China).”

Mr. Liu himself has been painfully aware not only of the “large share” of population living under authoritarianism in China, but his government's role in sustaining authoritarianism elsewhere. As he wrote in a 2006 essay, “The Negative Effects of the Rise of Dictatorship on World Democratization,” which was cited at his trial, “while the [Communist Party of China—CPC] has pursued market reforms on the economic front and made every effort to integrate China into the global economy, when it comes to politics, it is tenaciously clinging to its dictatorial system. . . . The current CPC regime is flush with money, and money diplomacy is very effective: it has enabled the remaining despotic regimes to linger on.” In fact, Mr. Liu continued, the CPC regime “has replaced the former Soviet Union to become a blood transfusion machine for other dictatorships. It provides large quantities of economic assistance to dictatorships such as North Korea, Cuba, and Myanmar.” He also cites the ways in which it has

assisted “rogue regimes” in Sudan, Syria, Cuba, and Zimbabwe, as well as in various Latin American countries that have turned to the political left, and has used energy cooperation to “attract the extremely anti-American, anti-Western Muslim countries, such as Iran.”

It is no wonder that Mr. Liu now sits in a Chinese prison; knowledge is power, and the prospect of such power in the hands of the people must make authoritarian regimes tremble. Mr. Liu’s main crime was his attempt to bring knowledge to the people of China—and the world. For this, we applaud him. And we should all take to heart his message of hope, so well articulated in his 2009 publication, “I Have No Enemies”: “I firmly believe that China’s political progress will not stop, and, filled with optimism, I look forward to the advent of a future free China. For there is no force that can put an end to the human quest for freedom, and China will in the end become a nation ruled by law, where human rights reign supreme.”

The World Movement for Democracy stands with Liu Xiaobo on his 55th Birthday, as we do with all those who struggle for democracy and human rights around the world. He and they are not alone.

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