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THE THIRD WAY

Jeremy Zucker and Jared Genser

Freedom for all, all for freedom

It is no secret that many people around the world do not enjoy basic human freedoms that the rest of us take for granted. Freedom to express our political opinions or religious beliefs, to assemble peacefully, to not be arbitrarily detained without due process: all these and more remain available to far too few of us around the globe. And while it is easy to wish for an improvement to humanity's common lot, very few have the courage to stand up to their oppressors and speak out. After all, such an active approach to fundamental change involves tremendous personal risk, and many have been imprisoned, or worse, for taking such risks.

These "prisoners of conscience" should not be forgotten. They need our help. Just as they often take steps to shine a bright light on oppression, so too should we focus attention on the injustice of their detention. From Aung San Suu Kyi to Nelson Mandela, they can become tomorrow's leaders in the cause of freedom. Speaking up on behalf of those who have taken a stand can help improve respect for human rights. Many non-governmental organisations (and certain governments) already do this kind of work, but much more needs to be done. Freedom Now was formed in 2001 with the belief that strategic and determined advocacy on behalf of certain prisoners of conscience can make an important contribution.



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We take on prisoners of conscience as clients, providing legal, political and public relations advocacy in pursuit of their release. And we focus on representing individuals who, by virtue of the nature of the injustices at issue, enable us to draw attention not only to their particular stories but also to larger patterns of oppression.

Through our efforts, and those of our in-country partners, we secured the release of Ayub Masih, a Pakistani Christian sentenced to death under Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws. Mr Masih was freed after the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his confinement violated fundamental principles of both Pakistani and international law, and members of the US

Congress urged President Pervez Musharraf to resolve the case. Subsequently, the Supreme Court acquitted Mr Masih. We were particularly pleased that the decision resulted not only in Mr Masih's release but also set a precedent for the conduct of future blasphemy trials.

In recent days, we have celebrated the release of Father Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly and Nguyen Dan Que from Vietnamese prisons. Both have spoken out for greater political and religious freedom in Vietnam. While it is premature to conclude that their release indicates the Vietnamese government's recognition that their causes are just, at a minimum it indicates an awareness that these men, and their causes, enjoy broad support around the world. We continue to hope that Chinese pro-democracy activist Yang Jianli (杨建利) will be freed from a mainland prison, where he has languished in ill health for more than 1,000 days, notwithstanding the legal case we have made and the political support we have gathered for his release.

Our approach is but one way to demonstrate our unwavering opposition to those who would deny fundamental freedoms to their fellow men and women. There are others. For example, governments can be encouraged to gather and disseminate more information concerning these prisoners, and to make human rights more prominent in their diplomatic discourse.

Those of us blessed with freedom to express our views should not waste the opportunity to make known our contempt for oppression and our support for those who speak out against it.

Jeremy Zucker is chairman, and Jared Genser is president, of Freedom Now, a Washington-based non-governmental organisation