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Again, Where Is Gao Zhisheng?

The pioneering human-rights lawyer represents a disturbing extreme case in China's approach to troublemakers.

Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize has brought much-needed attention to the struggle of others working for liberty in China. Gao Zhisheng, a human-rights lawyer who has been missing since April, is another example of how Beijing silences troublemakers. Mr. Gao hasn't had the privilege of courts and jails but has simply disappeared, without any official word on the circumstances of what his family and most observers believe to be his detention by the government.

Last week Mr. Gao's older brother was turned away when he went to a Beijing police station to ask about his whereabouts. Officers refused to file a missing persons report or take a written statement from the brother. "They dismissed me entirely; there was nothing I could do," he told us by phone.

Gao Zhisheng's plight began in 2006, when he was charged with "inciting subversion" for defending religious minorities and other controversial clients. The authorities revoked his license to practice law, and he released an open letter detailing the torture he suffered during detention. After his sentence was suspended, he was harassed and periodically detained before being kidnapped by security forces in February 2009.



Associated Press
Gao Zhisheng

Mr. Gao resurfaced in March this year, apparently as a result of a government effort to allay international concerns for his safety. At a news conference, he announced that he was giving up

activism for his family's sake: "My children need me by their side growing up." He vanished again shortly thereafter and has not been heard from.

Mr. Gao's presumed detention is the most egregious example to date of China's new willingness to circumvent its own laws when persecuting troublemakers. No dissident of his prominence has ever been detained for such a long time without official explanation. And because he is "missing" and outside of the legal system, Mr. Gao lacks all judicial and personal protections. Jailed activists are at least allowed phone calls and family visits; Mr. Gao has not even been able to contact his family and tell them he is alive.

As a litigator, Mr. Gao once spearheaded China's movement toward a modern legal system, making use of new laws protecting individual rights against state power. In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Justice named him one of the country's 10 best lawyers. For all of Mr. Gao's work to empower his fellow citizens, it has become increasingly clear that the Chinese government's regard for the rule of law stops at any challenge to its monopoly on power.

Earlier this month, 29 members of the U.S. House of Representatives signed an open letter urging President Barack Obama to push for the release of Messrs. Liu and Gao. Elsewhere in our pages today, Mr. Gao's 17-year-old daughter makes the same plea. Her story is a reminder that the obligation to free Mr. Gao and other dissidents is not merely a legal one—it is also a moral one.