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In China, Repression is a Family Affair

By Jared Genser

I last spoke to Liu Xia, the wife of Chinese democracy activist Liu Xiaobo, a few months before her husband won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. She had hired me to serve as her family's international pro bono lawyer. When our conversation turned to what might happen if the Nobel committee chose her husband, I expressed my concern that her own freedom might be taken away. She said she understood that reality, but courageously said leaving her husband behind was not an option.

Sure enough, for more than two-and-a-half years since the Nobel announcement, Ms. Liu has been kept under house arrest in her small Beijing apartment. She is in solitary confinement and has no Internet access, telephone or ability to receive mail. Her life is completely controlled by the Chinese security officials who sit outside and guard her extra-legal nightmare from outside scrutiny.

On April 23, the public caught a rare glimpse of this tragic heroine in front of a Beijing courtroom. As journalists looked on, Ms. Liu wept and shouted, "Tell everybody I'm not free!"

Ms. Liu had been escorted to court so she could observe the trial of her younger brother, who is charged with trumped-up economic crimes. She was asked by a journalist why the Chinese government had allowed her out of the house. "They want to break my one leg, then the other. I tell myself to stand straight, don't be afraid," she said. Then she asked, "Is it a crime to be Liu Xiaobo's wife?"

In today's China, yes. Beijing will not hesitate to bring its full weight to bear on the people who stand up for their own rights or the rights of others. For good measure, and to make clear it can act with impunity, the state also persecutes dissidents' immediate and extended families.

Ms. Liu's plight is sadly not unique. Take the situation of Chinese human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who was "disappeared" and tortured on a few occasions, most recently in April 2010, later resurfacing in a Chinese prison in December 2011. Before his disappearance, while serving a suspended three-year sentence for subversion, Chinese security officials lived in his home around the clock. Every weekday a group of guards followed his 10-year-old daughter Grace to school and would then stay in class to hurl insults at her. She was forced to bring along a male security officer whenever she went to the bathroom.

Or look at the case of the blind human-rights advocate Chen Guangcheng. Last April, he fled his illegal detention to reach the safety of the U.S. Embassy compound. Within two days of his escape, local thugs and Communist Party officials had ransacked his family compound, beaten his mother and brother, stolen any property of value and arrested his nephew Chen Kegui, who was later sentenced to more than three years in prison. Now Chen Guangcheng's mother and uncle are being interrogated over the episode.

Lest one think that these stories of higher-profile dissidents are exceptional cases, it is worth noting that in 2013 China's spending on domestic security will exceed the People's Liberation Army budget for the third year in a row. In all, Beijing will spend \$123.6 billion this year to protect itself from its own people—a staggering outlay, even for a country that experiences more 100,000 protests annually on bread-and-butter issues such as corruption, environmental degradation and unpaid wages.

While the Chinese government seeks to instill fear in its own population, its behavior projects weakness, insecurity and inhumanity. There is no other way to interpret the actions of a government that believes that children can be tortured in the name of the greater good.

Yet despite major flaws in the one-party system, the Chinese government manages to inspire self-censorship from the world's greatest powers when it comes to demanding it live up to basic standards on human rights that it has promised to uphold. If Chinese dissidents and their families can stand up to the Beijing despite grave personal risks, why can't the rest of us?

Mr. Genser is founder of Freedom Now and serves as international pro bono counsel to Liu Xiaobo, Liu Xia, Gao Zhisheng and Chen Kegui.