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A Dissident's Wife

By Geng He
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WITH the world's attention on the uprisings in the Middle East, repressive regimes elsewhere are taking the opportunity to tighten their grip on power. In [China](#), human rights activists have been disappearing since [a call went out last month](#) for a Tunisian-style "Jasmine Revolution." I know what their families are going through. Almost a year ago, the Chinese government [seized my husband](#) and since then, we have had no news of him. I don't know where he is, or even if he is alive.

In 2001, the Ministry of Justice listed my husband, Gao Zhisheng, as one of the top 10 lawyers in China. But when he began representing members of religious groups persecuted by the government, he became a target himself. His law license was revoked, and our family placed under constant surveillance. In 2006, he was convicted of inciting subversion based on a [confession](#) he made after his interrogators threatened our two children. He received a suspended sentence, but was briefly detained again a year later for writing an open letter to the United States Congress documenting human rights abuses in China.

Zhisheng wouldn't give up his work, and yet he was frightened for me and our children, so I [fled with them to asylum](#) in the United States. Soon after we left, in February 2009, [he was seized](#) by security officials, and that time held without charges for more than a year. International pressure persuaded the government to release him. But two weeks later, as soon as the world's attention moved elsewhere, he was abducted again. That was last April. No one has heard from him since.

We have good cause to fear that he is suffering. My husband has been tortured many times. In 2007, officials subjected him to electric shocks, held lighted cigarettes up to his eyes and pierced his genitals with toothpicks. In 2009, the police beat him with handguns for two days. He has been tied up and forced to sit motionless for hours, threatened with death and told that our children were having nervous breakdowns.

Though his treatment has been especially harsh, my husband is only one of many political prisoners in China. Among them are [Liu Xiaobo](#), the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who is serving an 11-year sentence for subversion, and his wife, Liu Xia, who is under house arrest. A human rights group reports that more than a hundred bloggers and

rights advocates have been interrogated or detained in connection to the “Jasmine Revolution.” And especially ominous have been the disappearances of other prominent human rights lawyers, like [Jiang Tianyong, Teng Biao and Tang Jitian](#).

In [President Obama’s speech](#) to the [United Nations](#) last year, he said that “freedom, justice and peace for the world must begin with freedom, justice and peace in the lives of individual human beings.” The Chinese government must not be allowed to claim that China is a nation operating under the rule of law while persecuting those who try to ensure that it respects the law. And when the government silences dissent, the international community must speak up.

Indeed, I am excited to have just learned that the United Nations has demanded that my husband be released, and hopeful that it will take a stand for the other prisoners as well. I appeal to Mr. Obama — a father, lawyer and leader of the country that has become my family’s new home — to make sure it does so. At the very least, he should ask President [Hu Jintao](#) to let Zhisheng contact us.

If he has been killed, we should be allowed the dignity of laying him to rest.

Geng He is the wife of a human rights lawyer missing in China. This essay was translated from the Chinese.