

If China frees Nobel winner, it will show its strength

By Václav Havel and Desmond M. Tutu
Friday, October 22, 2010
The Washington Post

Immediately after the imprisoned writer Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize this month, for more than two decades of pursuing democratic change in China, the Chinese government responded by calling him a criminal and accusing the Nobel Committee of blasphemy. It sent security agents to the Beijing apartment of his wife, Liu Xia, took away her mobile phone and placed her under house arrest. We have seen this before: in the dark days of apartheid, under the long shadow of the Iron Curtain. Whenever we took a small step toward securing the freedom of our people, we were stripped of our own.

As we write, Liu remains cloistered in a remote prison in northeast China. This fourth prison sentence of 11 years came after he co-authored Charter 08, a document calling on the Chinese government to institute democratic reforms and guarantee the freedoms of assembly, religion and expression. Though Charter 08 was modeled after Czechoslovakia's Charter '77, the fundamental values it invokes are no more Western than they are Chinese.

We nominated Liu for the Nobel Peace Prize this year because of the universality of his call for fundamental freedoms for his people.

At its core, Charter 08 asks the Chinese government to honor rights enshrined in the Chinese Constitution. The government has already signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and ratified the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights. In a recent interview with CNN, premier Wen Jiabao acknowledged that "Freedom of speech is indispensable. . . . The people's wishes for, and needs for, democracy and freedom are irresistible."

This need not be a moment of shame or insult for China. This should be a moment of pride, celebrating the fact that one of China's own is recognized as the world's greatest contributor to that which all nations seek: peace. It is an affirmation of one of humankind's oldest living languages that Liu's words in Charter 08, Chinese words, could inspire such admiration. It is a testament to the strength and courage of the Chinese people that Liu's actions have earned such widespread respect.

Despite its initial reaction, this remains an opportunity for the Chinese government to turn the page on a century of victimization. We know that many wrongs have been perpetrated against China and its people throughout history. But awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu is not one of them. Nor is the peaceful call for reform from the more than 10,000 Chinese citizens who dared to sign Charter 08.

Today, more than at any other time in history, the world looks to China as a leader. China has a chance to show that it is a forward-looking nation, as it has been for thousands of years. If it keeps Liu behind bars, the Chinese government is no more progressive than the ever paranoid

and closeted Burmese junta, the only other regime with the gall to lock away another recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi. Release Liu, and China continues its impressive emergence on the world stage. Beijing helped keep the global economy afloat amid recent crisis; now it can show the world that it has the confidence to face criticism and embrace change.

China has made such brave strides before. Thirty years ago, while we were still being punished simply for speaking our minds, the Chinese government opened up its economy and unleashed the industriousness and ingenuity of the Chinese people on the world's markets. The world has watched with awe as China pulled itself out of poverty and into a thriving, dynamic future. This is a moment for China to open up once again, to give its people the ability to compete in the marketplace of ideas where they will surely prove just as extraordinary.

We have seen this story in the churches of Soweto and the theaters of Prague. We know how it ends. We are able to write today, free of fear and full of hope, because our people won our freedom back. In time, Liu and the Chinese people will win their freedom.

After Liu's sentencing last year, he said in a statement: "I have long been aware that when an independent intellectual stands up to an autocratic state, step one toward freedom is often a step into prison. Now I am taking that step; and true freedom is that much nearer."

The Chinese government can continue to fight a losing battle, against the forces of democracy and freedom that its own premier recently called "irresistible." Or it can stand on the side of justice, free Liu Xiaobo and immediately end the house arrest imposed on his wife.

Václav Havel is a former president of the Czech Republic. Desmond Tutu is archbishop emeritus of Cape Town. They are honorary co-chairs of Freedom Now, which represents Liu Xiaobo as his international legal counsel.