

By: David Kilgour

Opinion

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Liu Xiaobo deserved the Nobel Prize

A recent Citizen opinion piece by Ramesh Thakur ("The Peace Prize is for peace," Dec. 23) wades reasonably through a number of issues, but ends by deferring to Beijing, suggesting the party-state there is more deserving of a Nobel Peace Prize than is 2010 winner Liu Xiaobo, or any other Chinese national.

Thakur's concluding words are revealing: "If the award of the Nobel Peace Prize is to be limited to promoting peace, demilitarization and disarmament, Liu was not a good choice. If a broader result is justified, then, on the scale of human misery and its alleviation in the grand sweep of history, instead of being the object of censure, is not the government of China a more worthy recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize than any individual Chinese?"

Indeed, by the criteria of promoting world peace, China would never be eligible for any prizes. Its arms sales in recent years to, and support for, violent oppressive regimes are well-known. It has sold battle tanks, fighter jets and missiles to the Burmese junta; it was the largest foreign supplier of small arms to the Bashir regime in Sudan in 2008; since 2000, it has sold armoured personnel carriers, aircraft and small arms to Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

When the UN Security Council wants to censure conduct, China often uses its veto to shield transgressors, particularly regimes to which it has sold arms or from which it is purchasing natural resources. In terms of peace within China, many have suffered or perished since 1949, most notably during Mao Tsetung's "Great Leap Forward" (1958-'62), which caused 35-45 million persons to starve to death. Today, millions continue to suffer state abuses, including Tibetans, Falun Gong, dispossessed farmers, questioning students, Uyghurs, Christians, Muslims and human rights activists. This domestic record would preclude an award even if governments were eligible for the prize.

Such realities are presumably why Thakur opts for the alleviation of human misery as a more credible basis to justify giving the award to Beijing. Hundreds of millions of Chinese fortunately are no longer living in grinding poverty, which is due mainly to Deng Xiaoping's courageous transformation after Mao's death of their economy into a market and exporting one in 1978.

Many Chinese, however, feel little or no improvement in their own lives, although a minority well-connected to the party is often enriched. A U.S. embassy in Beijing, in a cable leaked through WikiLeaks recently, quoted a contact close to the party leadership saying, "China's top leadership had carved up China's economic 'pie,' creating an ossified system in which 'vested

interests' drove decision-making and impeded reform as leaders manoeuvred to ensure that those interests were not threatened."

Accountability through elected leaders, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and transparency -- reforms Liu Xiaobo and many others have long called for -- could reduce corruption and nepotism and thereby transform the lives of most Chinese citizens.

According to the International Monetary Fund, the 2009 per capita GDP in democratic Taiwan was \$34,743 U.S. compared to \$7,518 in China.

Liu Xiaobo, China's first winner of the Peace Prize, today stands beside other renowned laureates, including Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Shirin Ebadi and Lech Walesa. Each of them stood with their people against entrenched tyrannies. A former professor, Liu has been a leader of the peaceful pro-democracy movement since joining the student protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and has been imprisoned three times. He is now serving an 11-year sentence in northeast China for "inciting subversion of state power."

Teng Biao, a lawyer and human rights activist who teaches law at the University of Law and Politics in Beijing, says: "Liu Xiaobo has nonetheless been fighting for peace, democracy and human rights. He has kept it up for 20 years. He enjoys a great deal of prestige among Chinese who aspire to democracy. He is one of the leading initiators of Charter 08, which outlines the required political reforms and which is destined to have more and more influence on intellectuals and, through them, the rest of Chinese society."

Li Xiaorong taught philosophy at a Beijing University and has become an academic in the West. She notes about Liu: "Until there is democracy, there is no way to know who represents at least more than 50% of those Chinese who would vote in a general election. If you believe that democratic participation is a universal human right, then, speaking up for the protection of that right, which is what Liu Xiaobo did, is giving voice to all the Chinese who have been deprived of that basic human right."

Liu is eminently worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize. The party-state should release him from prison and his wife, Liu Xia, from house arrest if it wishes to regain prestige lost in recent months.

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