

OP-ED

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Liu Xiaobo's empty chair holds more than the Chinese realise

BY SALIL SHETTY

There is going to be one empty place at this year's Nobel Peace Prize awards ceremony. Amongst the pomp and circumstance, before a packed house of a thousand invited guests and dignitaries gathered for the century-old event, the chair of this year's recipient, Liu Xiaobo, will be vacant.

Liu Xiaobo would have sat on the podium alongside the members of the Nobel Committee in Oslo's cavernous City Hall as he was honoured for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China. He would have given a speech, accepted his medal and diploma and continued his call for peaceful legal and political reform in China. He would have posed for pictures, given interviews, briefly enjoyed the glow of international recognition and then he would have gone home.

Instead, Liu Xiaobo is in jail. He is serving an 11-year sentence for "inciting subversion of state power" for his part as the leading author behind "Charter '08", a manifesto calling for the recognition of fundamental human rights in China. Liu has consistently maintained that the sentence violates both China's own constitution and basic human rights, but, like many others in China who have chosen to speak out, he has been severely punished.

Nobel rules require the winner or his or her immediate family to personally accept the prize. Liu's enforced absence means that for the first time since 1938, the peace prize will not be awarded at the ceremony. His wife could have collected the award for him, but she has been detained by Chinese authorities and is currently under house arrest in Beijing. Dozens of others who wanted to attend the ceremony have also been detained or forbidden from leaving China.

The Chinese Government may see this as a victory, but they would be mistaken. Despite a campaign of intense political pressure, intimidation and threats, they have not defeated Liu Xiaobo or the Nobel Committee. Because while the other chairs in the packed hall on the day of the awards ceremony will each hold only one person, Liu Xiaobo's empty chair will hold much more.

It will hold the thousands of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience currently languishing in Chinese jails or under house arrest, victims of prosecution and persecution simply for having the courage to voice their views. People like Tian Xi, caught in a legal loophole and facing possible indefinite detention after battling for compensation after being infected with HIV and hepatitis following a blood transfusion as a child. Or Zhao Lianhai, serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence for seeking justice for babies made ill by tainted powdered milk. Or Chen Guangcheng, a blind human rights activist kept under unofficial house arrest after serving a four-year prison sentence for his involvement in a legal action against forced sterilizations and abortions carried out by the authorities on thousands of women in the Shandong province.

It will hold the memory of China's attempts to sabotage this year's award with political pressure, arm twisting and economic blackmail used to try and intimidate the international community into a boycott of the ceremonies. The fact that, despite the pressure and threats,

the Chinese could only cajole a handful of countries, reflects the unacceptable nature of their demands. Governments and international institutions must continue to resist this type of arm-twisting.

On the 60th anniversary of Human Rights Day, China's actions will help to focus the world's attention on its abysmal record on human rights. The millions forced to leave their homes as a result of the massive construction projects. The outrage of Tiananmen Square. The abuses in Tibet. And the on-going persecutions of the Falun-Gong.

It is curious that such a powerful nation as China should feel so threatened by just one man. The truth is that Liu Xiaobo is more than just one man. He represents the ideals of the Nobel Peace prize and the hopes and aspirations of millions of Chinese who are currently silenced by the crushing weight of the Chinese government.

The Chinese government may have succeeded in keeping Liu Xiaobo's chair empty, but, in his absence, that chair speaks volumes.

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