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A Nobel Prize for a Chinese Dissident

By VACLAV HAVEL, DANA NEMCOVA, and VACLAV MALY
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PRAGUE — It is hard to believe that it was more than 30 years ago that we, a group of 242 private citizens concerned about human rights in Czechoslovakia, came together to sign a manifesto called Charter 77. That document called on the Communist Party to respect human rights, and said clearly that we no longer wanted to live in fear of state repression.

Our disparate group included ex-Communists, Catholics, Protestants, workers, liberal intellectuals, artists and writers who came together to speak with one voice. We were united by our dissatisfaction with a regime that demanded acts of obedience on an almost daily basis: Shopkeepers were pressured to put up propaganda signs that read “Workers of the world, unite!” Schoolchildren, students and workers were compelled to march in May Day parades. Office workers had to denounce American imperialism at the start of the workday. Citizens had to “vote” in elections in which the only choice was the ruling party.

Communist parties, then as now, prefer to divide and conquer. After Charter 77 was released, the government did its best to try and break us up. We were detained, and four of us eventually went to jail for several years. The authorities also got back at us in petty ways (including the suspension of driver’s licenses and confiscation of typewriters). Surveillance was stepped up, our homes and offices were searched, and a barrage of press attacks based on malicious lies sought to discredit us and our movement. This onslaught only strengthened our bonds. Charter 77 also reminded many of our fellow citizens who were silently suffering that they were not alone. In time, many of the ideas set forth in Charter 77 prevailed in Czechoslovakia. A wave of similar democratic reforms swept Eastern Europe in 1989.

We never would have guessed that our short manifesto would find an echo in China some 30 years later. In December 2008, a group of 303 Chinese activists, lawyers, intellectuals, academics, retired government officials, workers and peasants put forward their own manifesto titled Charter 08, calling for constitutional government, respect for human rights and other democratic reforms. It was published to mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Despite the best efforts of government officials to keep it off of Chinese computer screens, Charter 08 reached a nationwide audience via the Internet, and new signatories eventually reached more than 10,000.

As in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, the response of the Chinese government was swift and brutal. Dozens if not hundreds of signatories were called in for questioning. A handful of perceived ringleaders were detained. Professional promotions were held up, research grants denied and applications to travel abroad rejected. Newspapers and publishing houses were ordered to blacklist anyone who had signed Charter 08. Most

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seriously, the prominent writer and dissident Liu Xiaobo, a key drafter of Charter 08, was arrested. Liu had already spent five years in prison for his support of peaceful Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Held for more than a year with limited access to his wife or his lawyer, Liu was put on trial for subversion. In December 2009, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Despite Liu’s imprisonment, his ideas cannot be shackled. Charter 08 has articulated an alternative vision of China, challenging the official line that any decisions on reforms are the exclusive province of the state. It has encouraged younger Chinese to become politically active, and boldly made the case for the rule of law and constitutional multiparty democracy. And it has served as a jumping-off point for a series of conversations and essays on how to get there.

Perhaps most important, as in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, Charter 08 has forged connections among different groups that did not exist before. Before Charter 08, “we had to live in a certain kind of separate and solitary state,” one signatory wrote. “We were not good at expressing our own personal experiences to those around us.”

Liu Xiaobo and Charter 08 are changing that, for the better.

Of course, Charter 08 addresses a political milieu very different from 1970s Czechoslovakia. In its quest for economic growth, China has seemed to embrace some features far removed from traditional Communism. Especially for young, urban, educated white-collar workers, China can seem like a post-Communist country. And yet, China’s Communist Party still has lines that cannot be crossed. In spearheading the creation of Charter 08, Liu Xiaobo crossed the starkest line of all: Do not challenge the Communist Party’s monopoly on political power, and do not suggest that China’s problems – including widespread corruption, labor unrest, and rampant environmental degradation – might be connected to the lack of progress on political reform.

For making that very connection in an all too public way, Liu got more than a decade in prison. In an especially spiteful move, the authorities, perhaps fearful that his prison cell would become a political rallying point, have forced him to serve his sentence in the northeastern province of Liaoning, far from his wife Liu Xia and friends in Beijing.

Liu may be isolated, but he is not forgotten. Next month, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee will announce the recipient of the 2010 prize. We ask the Nobel Committee to honor Liu Xiaobo’s more than two decades of unflinching and peaceful advocacy for reform, and to make him the first Chinese recipient of that prestigious award. In doing so, the Nobel Committee would signal both to Liu and to the Chinese government that many inside China and around the world stand in solidarity with him, and his unwavering vision of freedom and human rights for the 1.3 billion people of China.

Vaclav Havel is the former president of the Czech Republic. Dana Nemcova is a leading Czech human rights advocate, and Vaclav Maly is the bishop of Prague. All three are signatories of Charter 77 and former leaders of the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.

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