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How Congress Can Help a Chinese Dissident

Honor Liu Xiaobo—a Nobel winner—with a street sign in front of China’s Embassy.

By Jared Genser

In the waning days of the current Congress, House Speaker Paul Ryan has an opportunity to send a message to Beijing about the value Americans place on human rights. He can bring to the floor for a vote a bill adopted unanimously in the Senate to rename the street in front of the Chinese Embassy for Liu Xiaobo, China’s jailed Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Mr. Liu was arrested in December 2008 after penning a series of essays and participating in the drafting of a pro-democracy manifesto known as Charter 08. The government held him in solitary confinement without charge or access to legal counsel before ultimately sentencing him to 11 years in prison for “inciting subversion.”

Shortly after Mr. Liu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, his wife, Liu Xia, was placed under house arrest. She has been held in her apartment in Beijing without charge or trial for more than five years. A guard is posted outside her door 24 hours a day.

When Chinese dissidents organize and challenge the one-party system, Beijing responds with an iron fist, imprisoning and torturing those who dare to speak out. Chinese authorities highlight Liu Xiaobo’s case to many of these troublemakers, pointing out that the world won’t help even Nobelist Liu Xiaobo.

President Obama has raised Mr. Liu’s case publicly just twice. But neither he nor anyone from the White House has publicly mentioned Liu Xia’s name let alone challenged China’s claim that she is free. If Mr. Obama has made any private efforts on behalf of the Lius, they have had no discernible effect.

In February the Senate adopted a bill to rename the street in front of the Chinese Embassy. This legislation followed the bipartisan tradition of a bill adopted by Congress in 1984 and signed into law by President Reagan renaming the street in front of the Soviet Embassy for dissident Andrei Sakharov, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975.

Speaking after the Senate action, State Department deputy spokesman Mark Toner indicated that the president would veto the bill if it reaches his desk. “We view this kind of legislative action as something that only complicates our efforts, so we oppose this approach,” he said.

Meanwhile, Rep. Jason Chaffetz, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Affairs Committee, apparently agrees with the administration and is blocking the bill from being considered in his committee. Speaker Ryan has the authority to move the bill to an immediate vote on the House floor, where it would likely pass by a bipartisan, veto-proof majority.

Surely the United States should celebrate the courage of individuals who stand up to authoritarian regimes. If Mr. Obama wants to veto this bill and stand with China against his fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, then let that be his legacy on human rights.

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