

Is Ma oblivious to China's abuses?

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Prominent Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo has been formally arrested on charges of subversion after being held under "residential surveillance" for half a year. Investigations against Liu may last for as long as seven months. China has drawn criticism from around the world for subjecting dissidents to such dubious legal procedures, and on such absurd grounds.

Liu's case has caught international attention not only out of concern for Liu himself, but because he might be the first domino among many to fall. Recently, more than 100 human rights activists, academics and writers have been put under supervision and house arrest. They, too, may face formal arrest and imprisonment.

The Beijing Public Security Bureau announced that Liu was arrested on charges of "agitation activities, such as spreading rumors and defaming the government, aimed at subversion of the state and overthrowing the socialist system." But it is widely thought that the real reason for Liu's detention is his role in promoting Charter 08, a manifesto calling for an end to one-party rule launched last year on Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day.

Charter 08 was initially signed by more than 300 people, including lawyers, academics, writers and artists, and later by a further 7,000 people around the world. The charter advocates universal values of freedom, human rights, democracy and constitutional government, which angered the Chinese authorities. Ironically, the Chinese government last year signed two international covenants on the protection of human rights that are essentially the same as those proclaimed by Charter 08. All the more absurd, then, that Liu should be detained and charged merely for exercising his freedom of speech.

China's handling of Liu's case seems rather familiar to people in Taiwan. In the days of its authoritarian rule, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government used similar means to suppress the opposition. Following the Kaohsiung Incident of Dec. 10, 1979 (also Human Rights Day), the KMT government rounded up and imprisoned opposition and democracy activists on grounds of "subversion." On the surface, this assault on Taiwan's democracy movement looked like a victory for the KMT, but in reality the Kaohsiung Incident woke the Taiwanese public up to the arbitrary nature of the KMT dictatorship and to the vital importance of democracy, freedom and human rights.

It was a watershed for Taiwan's democracy movement, following which democratization became a mainstream trend in Taiwan. In the years that followed, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was established, limits on press freedom were removed and direct elections were held for all seats in the National Assembly and Legislative Yuan. Support for the DPP kept growing as more and more voters rejected the KMT. Finally, the KMT lost the 2000 presidential election and government power was transferred peacefully to the DPP. China should learn from Taiwan's democratic experience that oppression cannot suppress people's thirst for democracy, and prison walls cannot contain their yearning for freedom. In fact, the more pressure the Chinese government applies, the greater the backlash will be.

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In his published observations on the 20th anniversary of the crackdown on China's 1989 democracy movement, President Ma Ying-jeou said that China had made progress with regard to human rights. Seeing the treatment given to Liu and other dissidents, can Ma, who advocates eventual reunification with China, be oblivious to the gulf that exists between Taiwan and China in terms of human rights? Will he remain silent as China's rulers trample civil rights underfoot? Ma claims to cherish human rights and the rule of law. Is what we see in China today the standard of freedom and civil rights that Ma would like to see applied to Taiwan in the future?

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