

Nobel Peace Prize-winner Liu Xiaobo, 61, dies in custody

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Liu Xiaobo speaks during an interview in a park in Beijing, China, on July 24, 2008.

Photo: AP

China's Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo (刘小波) died yesterday while still in custody following a battle with cancer, authorities said, after officials ignored international pleas to let him spend his final days free and abroad.

The prominent democracy advocate died aged 61, more than a month after he was transferred from prison to a heavily guarded hospital to be treated for late-stage liver cancer.

The legal bureau in Shenyang said on its Web site that Liu died three days after going into intensive care at the First Hospital of China Medical University.

The writer's death silences a government critic who had been a thorn in the side of the authorities for decades and became a symbol of Beijing's growing crackdown on dissenting voices.

International human rights groups, Western governments and local activists had urged authorities to free Liu and grant his final wish to be treated abroad.

Rights groups decried the way the government treated Liu, accusing authorities of manipulating information about his health and refusing to let him leave because they were afraid he would use the freedom to denounce the Chinese Communist Party's regime.

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As a gaunt Liu lay in his sickbed, a video was leaked showing the two Western doctors allowed to see him praising their Chinese counterparts — a scene that was denounced as “grotesque propaganda” by Human Rights Watch.

The German embassy said the video seemed to show that security organs were “steering the process, not medical experts.”

Liu was arrested in 2008 after coauthoring Charter 08, a bold petition that called for the protection of basic human rights and reform of China’s political system. He was sentenced to 11 years in prison in December 2009 for “subversion.”

His wife, Liu Xia (劉霞), was placed under house arrest in 2010, but she was allowed to see him at the hospital.

Her fate will now worry human rights groups, which had urged the government to free her alongside her husband.

Chinese authorities have largely squelched any attempts to publicly voice support for Liu.

Activists reported online that about half-dozen supporters who had traveled to Shenyang in an effort to see the couple were no longer contactable. The reports could not immediately be confirmed.

Tributes to Liu Xiaobo and criticism of China’s actions poured in after news of his death.

In Taipei late last night, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) said that Taiwan hoped that China could show self-confidence and push forward political reform in the wake of his passing.

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China's dream should include his dream of political progress in China, she said.

From Oslo, Norwegian Nobel Committee chairwoman Berit Reiss-Andersen told Reuters in an e-mailed statement that the Chinese government bears a heavy responsibility for Liu Xiaobo's death.

"We find it deeply disturbing that Liu Xiaobo was not transferred to a facility where he could receive adequate medical treatment before he became terminally ill," she said. "The Chinese government bears a heavy responsibility for his premature death."

Liu was and will remain an inspiration, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein said, expressing his "deep sorrow" at Liu's death.

"The human rights movement in China and across the world has lost a principled champion who devoted his life to defending and promoting human rights, peacefully and consistently, and who was jailed for standing up for his beliefs," Zeid said in a statement from Geneva, Switzerland.

Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia were a courageous couple and devoted to each other, and he urged Chinese authorities to guarantee her freedom of movement and to let her travel abroad, he said.

Liu's death puts China in dubious company as he became the first Nobel Peace Prize laureate to die in custody since German pacifist Carl von Ossietzky, who passed away in a hospital while held by the Nazis in 1938.

Additional reporting by AP and Reuters

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