

Opinion: Hu's Visit Clouded by Lingering Oppression

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When Chinese President Hu Jintao visits Washington this week, he can expect a gracious welcome and a state dinner that he was denied on his first visit in 2006. But he can also expect tough discussions on trade, foreign exchange, national security and, hopefully, human rights.

As head of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu has paid lip service to "putting the people first," but there has been little progress in liberalizing the political regime. The reality is that President Hu's idea of a "harmonious society" is one directed by the ruling elite, in which order emerges from the top-down, not spontaneously under a constitution of liberty.

China can be proud of the rapid economic progress it has made since 1978, when it was still a centrally planned economy with little foreign trade. Today, as the world's second largest economy, the People's Republic has gained wealth but not freedom. The Chinese people have a vastly wider range of economic and social opportunities than under the dictatorship of Mao Zedong, but their basic human rights continue to be denied by a Communist Party determined to maintain its monopoly on power.

In 2004, the National People's Congress, China's rubber-stamp parliament, amended the constitution to better protect the private sector, and for the first time added the words "human rights" to the document. Article 33, Section 3 reads "The state respects and protects human rights." Such language encouraged Chinese liberals to test the waters, only to find that reality did not match the rhetoric.

The Nobel Peace Prize awarded in October to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo provides the ideal case in point.

The drafting of "Charter '08," a manifesto for fundamental human rights, landed Liu in prison for 11 years. The empty chair at the Nobel ceremony is yet one more iconic image of the individual versus the state. Before his sentencing in 2009, Liu stood before the court and declared, "To block freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, to strangle humanity and to suppress the truth."

Charter '08 advocates a constitutional democracy with separation of powers, an independent judiciary and a bill of rights. Freedom of expression, religion, association and the protection of private property are all enshrined in the document. The hope of the Chinese framers is that Charter '08 will "bring to reality the goals and ideals that our people have incessantly been seeking for more than a hundred years, and ... bring a

brilliant new chapter to Chinese civilization."

The official reaction to Charter '08 and to Liu's Nobel Peace Prize was predictable: a storm of propaganda in support of the status quo. The mouthpiece of the CCP, the People's Daily, wrote in October, "By rumor-mongering and libeling, the charter denies the people's democratic dictatorship, socialism and the unitary state structure stipulated in the Chinese Constitution. The charter also entices people to join it, with the intent to alter the political system and overturn the government."

Yet, as Premier Wen Jiabao noted in a speech in August, "Without the safeguard of political reform, the fruits of economic reform would be lost and the goal of modernization would not materialize." In an interview with CNN in October, he recognized the fact that "freedom of speech is indispensable for any country."

The harmony, stability and peaceful development that Beijing seeks will be on shaky grounds until the CCP confronts the reality that sustainable order emerges not from top-down diktats, but from free markets and a genuine rule of law.

Premier Wen, in his 2003 speech at Harvard, said that China has "found the right path of development" and that "the essence of this path is to ... respect and protect the freedom of the Chinese people to pursue happiness." In 2007, he encouraged people to "oversee and criticize the government" and said, "It is particularly important that we need to make justice the most important value of the socialist system."

Justice, however, requires the prevention of injustice. Liu Xiaobo and others entrapped by China's jack-boot justice system deserve to be heard.

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