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**Congressional Executive Commission on China
Hearing on “Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo and the
Future of Political Reform in China”
November 9, 2010**

The Nobel Committee’s October 8, 2010 decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned Chinese writer and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo has put China’s human rights deficit squarely back on the international agenda. It does so at a time when rights and freedoms guaranteed by both China’s constitution and international law are under renewed attack by the Chinese government.

Liu Xiaobo is an outspoken critic of the Chinese government, a 54-year-old former university professor imprisoned in 2009 on “subversion” charges for his involvement with Charter ‘08, a political manifesto calling for gradual political reforms in China. Liu was also jailed in 1989 for his role in the Tiananmen Square protests and again in 1996 for criticizing China’s policy toward Taiwan and the Dalai Lama. Human Rights Watch honored Liu Xiaobo with the 2010 Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism for his fearless commitment to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly in China.

What does the average Chinese person know about Liu Xiaobo? What do those who know who Liu Xiaobo is think about him?

To a large extent, the debate about Liu Xiaobo and his winning the Nobel Prize has occurred outside China due to strict censorship of state media and the internet. Inside China, Liu Xiaobo has been relatively unknown outside of literary and intellectual circles, dissidents, human rights defenders, and civil society activists. That’s because even prior to his arrest in December 2008, his works as a writer were officially marginalized or censored because of their implicit or explicit political critiques.

Those in China who might want to learn about him are only able to access a government-approved portrait. After his arrest in December 2008, internet searches on Liu’s name in China behind the government’s so-called “great firewall” resulted overwhelmingly in state media reports on his sentencing. As recently as March 2010, internet searches on references to Liu Xiaobo behind the firewall produced nothing more than a frozen web browser.

The vast majority of Chinese citizens cannot—without considerable difficulty—know of his struggle for universal human rights, rule of law, and respect for the freedoms embodied in China’s constitution. The government’s 21-year cover-up of the June 1989 massacre of unarmed protesters in Beijing and other cities means that most Chinese know little about the event at all, let alone that it was Liu Xiaobo who brokered the agreement with military authorities that allowed the peaceful exit of thousands of students from Tiananmen Square on the night of June 3, 1989. That intervention saved countless lives.

For those Chinese citizens who do know Liu and who have worked with him, he is renowned as a tireless advocate of universal rights and freedoms and of peaceful political reform. More importantly, they see him as a high-profile symbol of the silent struggle of millions of others in China for the same goals. He has come to represent countless Chinese citizens languishing in secretive “black jails,” under house arrest, in re-education through labor camps, or serving prison sentences for advocating those same rights and freedoms.

What does the average Chinese person know about his winning the Nobel? What does he or she think about it?

For the majority of Chinese citizens, whose news come via censored media, news of Liu’s Nobel Prize was not immediate, as would occur in most countries, but came the following day.

That’s because the immediate official Chinese government reaction to Liu’s Nobel Prize was silence. Neither Chinese Central Television nor Hong Kong’s nominally independent Phoenix TV mentioned Liu’s Nobel Prize on the day of the announcement. Chinese censors quickly scrubbed, or “harmonized,” Chinese-language internet commentary, text messages, web pages, and foreign television broadcasts which broadcast news of Liu’s Nobel Prize.

The only official comment available to Chinese citizens came later that day in the form of Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ October 9, 2010 statement that described Liu as a “criminal” and criticized Liu’s Nobel Prize victory as an act that “profanes the Nobel Peace Prize.” Chinese journalists were told to report only on the basis of the official statement.

However, since October 9, the Chinese government has expanded its coverage of Liu winning the Nobel Prize. That coverage has been uniformly unflattering, including an October 14 Xinhua report describing the Nobel Prize as a “political tool of the West.” Three days later, Xinhua published a round-up of foreign commentary from countries including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Russia, and even Norway that criticized Liu’s Nobel

as politically motivated and inappropriate. On October 24, Xinhua described the members of the Nobel Committee as politicized and “ignorant of world affairs.”

The most detailed official media coverage of Liu’s Nobel Prize is an October 28, 2010 Xinhua report titled “Who is Liu Xiaobo?” The article intensified the official smear campaign against Liu by listing a selective survey of quotes allegedly taken from Liu’s three decades of written work designed to cast doubt on his credibility, patriotism, and even his sobriety. According to the article, Liu is a traitorous operative for foreign organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy. The piece featured quotes allegedly sourced from Liu’s works that appeared to make him sympathetic to China’s colonization by foreign powers and critical of the physical and psychological strength of the Chinese people. Among some Chinese citizens, this intensifying official smear campaign is triggering a combination of cynical dismissal and angry nationalism about the award.

At the same time, the award is also piquing curiosity in China about who Liu really is and why the government is so critical of him and his work. We know that Chinese activists have gone out onto the streets of Beijing and boarded buses to take informal surveys of people’s knowledge of Liu and his Nobel Prize. The majority of those quizzed in this very unscientific poll have never heard of Liu Xiaobo, but they express reflexive pride that a Chinese has won a Nobel Peace Prize and for endorsing rights and freedoms which they themselves support. Those individuals who have heard of Liu Xiaobo and have negative opinions of him through official state media coverage relate that they are still supportive of Liu’s right to speak out despite their apparently divergent views.

Paradoxically, the Chinese government’s intensifying smear campaign of Liu Xiaobo is boosting Chinese citizens’ awareness of who he is and an interest in what he had done to be the target of such official vitriol. This curiosity will inevitably prompt those citizens with internet access and the interest and capability to use firewall circumvention tools to search for information about Liu Xiaobo that doesn’t come from the Chinese government. Human Rights Watch’s Chinese-language website has registered a record number of browsers accessing our site (blocked in China) through proxy servers since the October 8 Nobel announcement. On that day alone, our Chinese-language website recorded more than 1,600 visits by internet users in China, compared to a usual daily average of about 60 visits.

What debate, if any, has Liu Xiaobo’s winning the Nobel sparked in China among both ordinary people (*laobaixing*) and elites?

Among elites interested in peaceful political change, Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Prize has provided a platform for expressing support for him and the ideals embodied in Charter ‘08. Just days after the prize was announced, a group of 23 senior Communist Party officials and intellectuals issued a public letter that praised Liu as

a “splendid choice” for a Nobel Peace Prize, and echoed calls for his immediate release and an end to the “invisible black hand” of official censorship.

Within the Chinese leadership, Liu’s Nobel Prize appears to have been profoundly unsettling. Confident that its warning to the Norwegian government prior to the Nobel Prize announcement had averted any chance of Liu’s victory, senior leaders appear to have been taken aback by the Nobel Committee’s decision.

On October 3, 2010, in a CNN interview, Premier Wen Jiabao advocated easing government restrictions on basic rights and freedoms, and stated that “freedom of speech is indispensable.” Wen’s views, at odds with the policies of a government that since 2007 has steadily tightened its chokehold on dissidents, civil society activists, and journalists, suggested ongoing divisions in the leadership about those restrictions. Official censors responded by purging all video and transcripts of the CNN interview from Chinese internet sites.

Liu’s Nobel Prize is a globally-known example of the gap between the Chinese government’s lofty rhetoric on support for rule of law and human rights and the grimmer reality on the ground—an image the Chinese government has strenuously worked to cover up for over a decade, particularly in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As Liu’s writings and the text of Charter ‘08 circulate virally across China’s blogosphere among those interested in the country’s most famous political prisoner, familiarity and support with universal rights and freedoms and the Chinese government’s unwillingness to deliver on those becomes more widespread.

The Chinese leadership will no doubt be debating whether it was a mistake to imprison Liu in the first place. Hardliners decided to make an example of Liu Xiaobo by sentencing him in 2008 to the longest possible prison term for “inciting subversion” since it became a crime in 1996; moderates, who had argued that Liu could continue to be tolerated though kept under surveillance, probably resisted imprisoning him for fear he would become a cause celebre. Those fears have now come to pass, but it remains unclear whether officials such as Xi Jinping and Li Kejiang, due to take over the leadership of China in 2012, will think seriously about freeing Liu before his imprisonment does even more damage to the Chinese government’s reputation.