

Freedom House Comments for Press Conference Honoring Nobel Peace Prize Winner Liu Xiaobo delivered by Paula Schrieffer, Director of Advocacy.

I want to express my great appreciation to the TLHRC and its wonderful co-chairs, as well as to the many members of Congress who took the time to speak here today.

We have heard quite a bit about Liu Xiaobo and the importance of the Nobel prize today, so I will focus my comments on one of the many issues Liu has been fighting hard for.

While Freedom House has ranked China as a fully Not Free in a range of political rights and civil liberties since we first began measuring in 1972, I want to speak about an area that Liu Xiaobo and his fellow Charter 08 signatories identified as needing urgent reform, and that is freedom of religion.

In China today, although the number of religious believers has expanded in recent years, religious freedom is sharply curtailed and the country is home to arguably the largest number of religious prisoners in the world. Pressure on religious believers has further intensified over the past year with crackdowns surrounding the Shanghai World Expo and the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Liu Xiaobo.

Despite growing interest in spiritual matters on the part of average Chinese, multiple layers of constraints prevent Chinese citizens of all faiths from fully exercising their right to this fundamental freedom:

- For the five officially-sanctioned religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism—theology, clergy appointments, and temples require the approval of state-run religious authorities. Activities organized outside the strictly-defined scope of Communist Party-approved practices are subject to punishment. Unregistered Buddhist temples are destroyed.
- Some faiths—notably the Falun Gong spiritual group and a number of Buddhist and Christian sects—are banned outright. Their adherents are systematically pursued by security forces. In Falun Gong's case, this is part of a "strike hard" campaign that has now gone on for over a decade, affecting millions. Surveillance, long prison terms, and forced conversion efforts, often involving brutal physical and psychiatric torture, are routine.
- In ethnic minority regions, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, restrictions and controls on religious practice are especially harsh. I will leave it to my colleagues to expand on conditions there, but point out that they have taken a notable turn for the worse since popular unrest broke out in these regions in 2008 and 2009.
- Even the lawyers who have sought to defend religious believers have been harassed, disbarred, and tortured. The most egregious case has been the disappearance of prominent human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, himself a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, who vanished into police custody on April 2010 and has not been heard from since.

Repression of religious freedom has a corrosive effect on the potential for Chinese society as a whole to become truly stable, peaceful, and prosperous. As such, on this day, as the Nobel Committee prepares to grant its peace prize to Liu Xiaobo, we call on the Chinese authorities not only to release him, but also all of the individuals in China imprisoned solely for the peaceful practice of their personal faith.