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China jails Liu Xiaobo for 11 years

OUTCRY: Human rights groups, the US and the EU expressed dismay over the ‘disproportionately’ long sentence that was seen as a warning to other dissidents

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One of China’s most prominent dissidents, Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波), was jailed yesterday for 11 years for campaigning for political freedoms, with the stiff sentence on a subversion charge swiftly condemned by rights groups and Washington.

Liu, who turns 54 on Monday, helped organize the “Charter 08” petition, which called for sweeping political reforms, and before that was prominent in the 1989 pro-democracy protests centered on Tiananmen Square that were crushed by armed troops.

He stood quietly in a Beijing courtroom as a judge found him guilty of “inciting subversion of state power” for his role in the petition and for online essays critical of the Chinese Communist Party, defense lawyer Shang Baojun (尚寶軍) said.

Liu was not allowed to respond in court to the sentence.

“Xiaobo and I were very calm when the verdict was read. We were mentally prepared for it that he would get a long sentence,” said Liu’s wife, Liu Xia (劉霞), who was allowed in to hear the verdict.

She was barred from the trial on Wednesday.

“Later we were allowed 10 minutes together, and he told me he would appeal, even if the chances of success are low,” she said.

Liu has been among the most combative critics of China’s one-party rule.

His case sparked an outcry from Western governments and rights activists at home and abroad.

The unusually harsh sentence drew a fresh outcry that is likely to grow.

China “sees Liu Xiaobo as a representative figure, and thinks [it] can scare the others into silence with such a harsh sentence,” dissident writer and Christian activist Yu Jie (余杰) said. “[Chinese President] Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) believes that with the West weakened and human rights taking a back seat, he can ignore

pressure over attacks on freedom of expression.”

FOREIGN RESPONSE

The Swedish EU presidency yesterday condemned the decision, saying it raised concerns about freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial in China.

“The Presidency of the European Union is deeply concerned by the disproportionate sentence against the prominent human rights defender Liu Xiaobo,” it said in a statement. “The verdict against Mr Liu gives rise to concern with respect to freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial in China.”

“We continue to call on the government of China to release him immediately,” US embassy official Gregory May told reporters outside the courthouse following sentencing. “Persecution of individuals for the peaceful expression of political views is inconsistent with internationally recognized norms of human rights.”

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said in a statement that the verdict cast “an ominous shadow” over China’s commitments to protect human rights.

“The conviction and extremely harsh sentencing of Liu Xiaobo mark a further severe restriction on the scope of freedom of expression in China,” she said.

TAIWAN RESPONSE

In Taiwan, when asked to comment on Liu’s sentence, Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Chairwoman Lai Shin-yuan (賴幸媛) said “human rights are universal values.”

“We care about human rights not only in Taiwan but in every corner of the world. The MAC has been consistent in human rights-related issues,” she said, stopping short of saying more.

DPP RESPONSE

Meanwhile, Democratic Progressive Party spokeswoman Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴) yesterday called on China to embrace democracy and human rights.

Hsiao condemned the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government for remaining silent on Liu’s case while many countries around the world have voiced their support for Liu.

“President Ma Ying-jeou [馬英九] used to pride himself on supporting demonstrators for democracy at Tiananmen Square in 1989, but he has been silent about democracy in China since he took office as president last year,” Hsiao said.

“We are very disappointed in him, and we are worried the government may further diverge from mainstream public opinion during cross-strait exchanges in the future,” she said.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY LOA IOK-SIN AND SHIH HSIU-CHUAN

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