



FREEDOM NOW



October 10, 2014

Dear President Obama,

We write regarding your forthcoming trip to China. For decades, our organizations have documented human rights abuses there, advocated for redress, and pressed the United States to make human rights a cornerstone of its bilateral relationship.

Your visit comes at a time of extraordinary and brutal repression of peaceful advocacy for human rights in China. We urge that you use this trip to make clear—publicly and unequivocally—that the government’s crackdown on civil society is a barrier to strategic partnership and an impediment to China’s future as a full and responsible member of the international community.

We appreciate your and other senior officials’ recent statements voicing strong support for the role of civil society globally as well as grave concerns about 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and Uighur economist Ilham Tohti, two prominent human rights defenders baselessly imprisoned by the Chinese government. We urge that while in Beijing you again publicly call for the release of these two individuals, as well as the release of Liu’s wife Liu Xia; human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who is not free despite having been released from prison; and Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist leader whose health is reportedly deteriorating after a decade in prison.

The extraordinary rise of civil society and the growing role of independent lawyers, writers, and other activists working tirelessly to promote universally recognized human rights has been one of the most positive developments in China in the past decade. From peaceful demonstrators demanding democracy in Hong Kong and those in the mainland who support them, to the brave signatories of Charter ‘08 and members of the New Citizens Movement promoting civic

engagement, to those who have organized to protect women's rights and promote inter-ethnic dialogue—people across China are peacefully trying to assert a role in their country's governance, to make the legal system function according to laws rather than political imperatives, and to combat discrimination. Their efforts embody the role and aspirations you outlined in your recent remarks on civil society, and their work is critical to China's future not only as a rights-respecting state, but as a viable bilateral partner for the United States.

Yet the new leadership of President Xi Jinping, who assumed power in March 2013, has targeted these people and their efforts with a hostility unseen in more than a decade. Those targeted range from high-profile peaceful activists like human rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong to less prominent individuals such as journalist Gao Yu, lawyer Tang Jingling, and the students of Ilham Tohti. In the past year authorities have aggressively pursued criminal prosecutions against many such individuals, often resulting in prison terms. Peaceful advocacy, even around topics ostensibly approved by the state, such as combatting corruption, is now being criminalized in an unprecedented way, as reflected in the number of prosecutions on charges of “disturbing public order” or “picking quarrels and stirring up troubles.” Simply discussing self-immolations has now resulted in prosecutions against dozens of Tibetans on charges of “incitement.”

Some have been subject to shockingly brutal treatment: Ilham Tohti was denied food for 10 days and shackled for more than a month while awaiting trial; Tie Liu, an outspoken 81-year-old writer, has been detained for “picking quarrels and stirring up troubles”; Pu Zhiqiang, a Tiananmen veteran, and Chen Kegui, the nephew of legal advocate Chen Guangcheng, are held without access to adequate medical treatment. Cao Shunli, who sought to raise China's human rights violations through the United Nations Human Rights Council, died at age 52 of multiple organ failure after public security authorities in Beijing denied her access to adequate medical care while she was being detained. We regularly receive credible information of ongoing torture in detention.

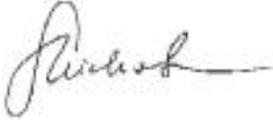
This brutality is part of a broader, systematic effort to more tightly control society as a whole. Since President Xi came into power the government has redoubled efforts to criminalize online speech, silence journalists, and strengthen the ideological training of university lecturers, academic researchers, and Party members. Urgent legal reforms have stalled, and the legitimate underlying grievances of ethnic minorities, religious groups, and other vulnerable communities are exacerbated through repression rather than addressed.

The deteriorating human rights environment and the extraordinary damage done to China's civil society should be given greater prominence in the bilateral relationship generally and your upcoming trip in particular. We appreciate the U.S. government's efforts to raise individual cases and discuss broader human rights issues with Chinese counterparts. While it may be tempting to conclude from Beijing's increasing intransigence that such efforts are ineffective, we believe that by publicly raising the cases of particular activists during your visit to Beijing, you may afford them protection from ill-treatment or torture in detention, and increase the prospects of parole or humanitarian release. Even if these results are not achieved, your speaking about these activists now would bring them and their family members a degree of hope, and would serve as one of the only means of demanding accountability from Chinese authorities.

These individuals have played critical roles in pressuring the government to change abusive policies, raising public awareness about human rights, and in making the government slightly more accountable and transparent. They are key allies of the United States as it seeks a China that will be a responsible partner.

We urge that you honor their efforts and the commitment of the United States to defending human rights around the world by publicly calling for their release.

Sincerely,



Sophie Richardson, China Director, Human Rights Watch.



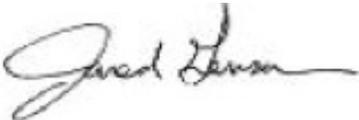
Margaret Huang, Chief of Staff, Amnesty International, USA.



David J. Kramer, President, Freedom House.



Matteo Mecacci, President, the International Campaign for Tibet.



Jared Genser, Founder, Freedom Now.



Sharon Hom, Executive Director, Human Rights in China.



Elisa Massimino, President and CEO, Human Rights First.



Omer Kanat, General Secretary, Uyghur American Association.



Randall Schriver, President and CEO, Project 2049 Institute.