Supporters of China's Liu Xiaobo should be wary of his Nobel Peace Prize

By Ronald R. Krebs
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Once more, the Nobel Peace Prize committee has elected to honor a long-suffering dissident in a regime that brooks no dissent. Once more, right-thinking people around the globe -- including President Obama, last year's Nobel peace laureate -- have hailed the committee for its inspiring choice. Once more, activists hope that the prize will make a difference to the dissident, to the democracy movement in his country and to the cause of human rights.

And once more, they'll be wrong.

This year the dissident of choice is Liu Xiaobo. Liu is, as the committee says, "the foremost symbol" of the struggle for human rights in China. The lead author of Charter 08, and prominent in the Chinese democracy movement since the Tiananmen Square killings in 1989, Liu has been jailed repeatedly. His commitment to the principles of democracy and human rights has come at great personal cost. He deserves our admiration as well as international recognition for his sacrifices and accomplishments.

But should he want the Nobel Peace Prize? And should advocates of democracy and human rights in China want him to get it? Amnesty International certainly thinks so: "Liu Xiaobo is a worthy winner of the Nobel Peace Prize," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty's deputy director for the Asia-Pacific region. "We hope it will keep the spotlight on the struggle for fundamental freedoms and concrete protection of human rights that Liu and many other activists in China are dedicated to."

Among many others who agree are the governments of the major European powers, the presidents of the European Commission and the European Parliament, and the head of the watchdog group Freedom House. Liu's wife is hopeful that the award will lead to her husband's release from prison.

Such enthusiasm for this year's award is not warranted. Giving the Nobel Peace Prize to someone like Liu is not an especially rare event. In my research on the prize, I've found that awards aimed at promoting greater freedom in repressive regimes have been increasingly common since the mid-1970s. Between 1901 and 1975, the Peace Prize was given only three times for this purpose; since 1976, it has happened 10 times.

Alas, the record in such cases is hardly encouraging. Authoritarian regimes care more about maintaining their hold on power than pleasing the international community. While the Nobel committee's statement admonished the Chinese, saying that "China's new status" as a world power "must entail increased responsibility" for its behavior at home, it seems unlikely that Beijing will comply. Authoritarian regimes often seem to fear the award, prompting them to lash out against it; China has not been the only such regime to threaten repercussions against Norway for giving the prize to a "subversive."
While local activists often feel gratified by the Nobel committee’s attention and imprimatur, and sometimes subsequently ramp up their protests, that reaction is ill-advised. In the past, pressured and powerful states have clamped down even harder on domestic dissent in the wake of the Nobel Peace Prize, rather than knuckle under to the Nobel committee.

This is the lesson of the awards to Tibet's Dalai Lama (1989), Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi (1991) and Iran's Shirin Ebadi (2003). Of course, things can't get much worse for Liu, who is already serving an 11-year prison sentence, but they can get worse for the beleaguered Chinese democracy movement.

Realists might dismiss the Nobel Peace Prize as an award that does nothing but warm the hearts of liberal do-gooders. Quite often, that's true. But the well-intentioned souls on the Nobel Peace Prize committee have, in the past three decades, devoted themselves to promoting change in authoritarian regimes. In these cases, the prize has indeed become relevant -- just not in a good way.

Mr. Liu, congratulations. And caveat victor: Winner beware.

rkrebs@umn.edu

Ronald R. Krebs is an associate professor of political science at the University of Minnesota. His study "The False Promise of the Nobel Peace Prize" was published last year in Political Science Quarterly.

For Ronald Krebs's assessment of President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize last year, see his essay "Winning the Prize, Losing the Peace."

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