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Why PRC does not like Liu’s Nobel Prize?

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Since China’s dissident intellectual Liu Xiaobo was announced to be the Nobel Peace Prize winner for the year 2010, debates on democracy and China have got a fresh lease of life. Liu Xiaobo, main architect of the Charter 08 and a prominent voice on democratisation, human rights and rule of law in China, who has been under arrest since December 2008 under the charge of “inciting the subversion of the state power” is suddenly being projected as a hero of the epic struggle for democratisation in and of China. On the other hand, the Chinese media, visibly upset with the award to Liu, is busy projecting him as a villain and the Nobel Committee as the agency that wants to destabilise the People’s Republic.

This is completely on the expected lines as can be understood from the trajectory of the previous debates on China, democracy and human rights. West accuses China of abusing human rights and ignoring the rule of law. China in return accuses the US and the west in general of harming the Chinese national interests. In the last one decade, China has used its nationalism to duck the ideological questions coming from the west. At the simplest level, the great power politics involving the liberal democratic west led by the US and single party China is about rhetoric and shadow boxing, looking for the brownie points as the incentives in the fight. Therefore, rhetoric around the Nobel peace Prize is acceptable.

The great danger that is involved in this situation is that under the rhetoric of the supporters and the opponents, and amongst the debates that paint the picture black or white as far as China’s political system is concerned, it is important to study how and why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) thinks of democracy and democratic principles.

There is no disagreement on the centrality of the CCP in China. It finds its place due to historical causes and actions. Therefore, even if there has to blossom any form of democracy of China, Party will remain central to those efforts. This is the cardinal principle that must be kept in mind by everyone hoping for democratisation of China. Learning from the political structures and processes abroad, especially since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, CCP has shown considerable degree of adaptability in its structure and functioning and it has also spoken of inner party democracy. However, while CCP has considered allowing certain liberal principles like media that it considers as representing western culture, only as necessary evils, CCP draws a clear line of limits as far as criticism of government, defamation of leadership and political subversion are considered. Therefore, any democratisation of the People’s Republic must happen within the limits that the CCP is willing to set.

Thus, awarding Nobel Peace Prize to anyone that the Party considers to be dissident has raised the profile of Liu Xiaobo around the world but at the same time, expectedly, it has proved to be

counterproductive for democratisation in China since it has given strength to the hardliners inside the CCP and the CCP is more likely to resort to nationalism in order to demonise any such moves though its media. This is exemplified by a recent incident when the Chinese media asked for an apology from the Nobel Committee for allegedly having hurt the Chinese people.

Thus, other attempts at democratisation like the struggle for rule of law must be preceded before demanding for electorate democracy in China. Even then, role of the Party comes into question since in reference to China, CCP and state are referred to in an interchangeable manner. Because of the all pervasive nature of the party, there is no separation of state apparatus in China. However, the central leadership of CCP has shown adaptability in using what it calls the necessary evils, like media and non governmental organisations when it has had to rein in lower levels of the party on issues like corruption. However, when someone has questioned the Party’s sacrosanct role as a superstructure in China, like the Charter 08 that called for establishing the superiority of the Constitution and constitutionalism above the diktats of the CCP, state apparatus, under control of the CCP, has showed little tolerance and acted in a heavy handed manner.

In its studies on the failed cases of communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the CCP has blamed western intervention in the name of democracy and human rights as one of the primary causes of the downfall of the communist states. It has also blamed the communist parties for discontent among the masses that led to their falls. Thus, China’s constant projections of the claimed success of Chinese model and CCP’s adaptability is accommodating diverse socioeconomic groups emanate from its understanding of the fall of communism elsewhere. At the same time, it has come down hard on any recommendations that remotely resemble complete democratisation in China. This explains why Liu Xiaobo and his Charter 08 are prohibited in the power corridors inside the People’s Republic.

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