

The impact of Liu Xiaobo's peace prize will be felt among China's leaders, scholars and perhaps its people, writes **Jerome A. Cohen**

Nobel ripples

When evaluating the impact of Friday's award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波), there are at least six audiences to consider, in addition to the laureate himself: China's Communist Party leaders, who stifle dissent to maintain their power; legal elites caught between party policies and rule of law requirements; a congeries of dissidents and activists for whom Liu has now become the foremost symbol; the far larger and more diverse community of intellectuals struggling to reconcile China's traditions, "Westernisation", nationalism and universal values; the broad masses who had never before heard of Liu or the Charter 08 democracy manifesto that he helped draft and that was ultimately signed by roughly 10,000 people; and the outside world that has once again been stimulated to focus on China's political system.

Although party leaders have imposed an increasingly repressive regime upon the

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country during the past three years since the 17th party congress, they cannot remain insensitive to munitions-maker Alfred Nobel's latest bombshell.

Their immediate reaction was abysmal. The leadership remained silent but the Foreign Ministry declared the Nobel committee's decision a "desecration" of the donor's intent, and the police suppressed all signs of domestic celebration. After a brief meeting with her imprisoned husband, Liu's wife was placed under de facto house arrest, and any overt supporters were detained, beaten or threatened. Even Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶), who for weeks has stirred speculation by hinting that he favours universal values and political reform, kept silent when asked for his view of the award.

Yet Politburo members are too intelligent to think that their silence plus suppression can defuse the current challenge. That tactic worked well in riding out the storms created by the Dalai Lama's

1989 peace prize and by less famous but important awards such as the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for fellow dissident Hu Jia (胡佳) and the Philippines' Magsaysay award for blind "barefoot lawyer" Chen Guangcheng (陳光誠). The present situation, however, is potentially incendiary.

Of course, its impact will be veiled in many respects. It is unlikely to gain Liu immediate relief. After all, Hu remains behind bars, and Chen, despite the end of his prison term, suffers enforced isolation at home. But Liu's Nobel may ignite concerns that even influence the jockeying for seats on the new Politburo Standing Committee to be installed in 2012.

Many restless party cadres will want some leaders who can positively respond to domestic and international human rights pressures.

Certainly many among China's burgeoning legal elites would welcome such a change. Hundreds of thousands of judges, prosecutors, lawyers, administrative officials and law professors – most of them party members – have been struggling with the implications for their daily work of the reactionary party line on law emanating from the 17th party congress, and the appointments of politically reliable but professionally unqualified high legal officials.

The prize reminds them of the universal values on which China's post-1979 law reforms have been based, and of the outside world that rejects the party's intensifying insistence on distorted applications of the very norms it has imported. The prize has undoubtedly added to long-simmering "red versus expert" tensions that pit more regressive party groups against relatively more liberal legal elites.

A more obvious audience is the country's embattled dissidents and rights activists, who have received a substantial morale booster, as have the courageous lawyers who try to represent them. These lonely proponents of free speech and the rule of law hunger for international recognition of their sacrifices, even at the cost of further repression.

Unlike dissidents and rights activists,

most Chinese intellectuals avoid confrontation. They differ among themselves about the nation's circumstances, goals and policies. Yet, whatever their prescriptions for reform, they believe that progress can only be made through patient, long-term efforts that do not provoke party crackdowns. Some do not wish to lose the considerable benefits brought to them by China's socio-economic progress. Others understandably fear martyrdom. Yet the prize has plainly stoked the fires of their ongoing debates over China's heritage, its contemporary dilemmas and its future.

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of the prize on the hundreds of millions of Chinese who, because of party-government controls over the media and internet, never before heard of Liu and Charter 08. Due to this week's massive campaign to conceal news of the award from the public, probably most still remain uninformed.

Moreover, the regime seems poised to turn a vice into a virtue by gradually releasing the news only after imposing its own interpretation, as much as possible, upon it. The prize has already been called

an "insult" that is the latest imperialist scheme to humiliate the Chinese people by repudiating their values and achievements.

It is easiest, to be sure, to see the impact of the prize on the outside world. Political leaders and public opinion in all democratic countries overwhelmingly endorse the choice.

Even Taiwan's president, Ma Ying-jeou, who has been pursuing a historic reconciliation between Taiwan and the People's Republic, nevertheless requested Liu's immediate release. An impressive international consensus supports the principle expressed by the Nobel committee's chairman: "We have a responsibility to speak when others are unable to speak."

Not since the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen tragedy have China's leaders been so out of step with humanity.

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