

China, Canada, the Olympics, and Human Rights

China continues to wage a Cold War against its very own citizens

By Online: Martin Tampier Friday, February 12, 2010

- Martin Tampier

Canada will open its arms to athletes from over 80 nations. As Olympic hosts, we do not discriminate between countries whose governments do or do not share our values. And rightly so, many will say, for the Olympics are about sports and not about politics. Yet, this is only part of the truth. The Olympic Games always contain a strong political element. The decision of the IOC to hold the Games in Beijing in 2008 was clearly a political one. Holding the Games always includes the desire to bring different cultures and political convictions together, overcome diplomatic obstacles, and promote international harmony, peace, and human dignity.

But in China, no positive effect along those lines has been observed. On the contrary, the Chinese government has intensified the persecution of its own very best citizens since about the year before the Summer Olympics, and this persecution is continuing and increasing today, unabatedly. It is well known that corruption is a major hindrance on the nation's way towards greater prosperity. The basic tenets of Christianity, such as not to lie or steal and to love your neighbour, make this religion a strong opponent of corruption and social injustice. Yet, it is especially this group that continues to be ostracized and brutally persecuted by China's communist government.

The persecution not only includes church members and pastors – including men, women, the old, and the young – but also those who defend them. As Canadians, we find it hard to imagine that a government could completely ignore the rule of law and arrest, incarcerate, and torture lawyers that stand up for human rights supposedly guaranteed by the Chinese state. This cruel irony meant the withdrawal of their licences to 22 human rights lawyers in 2009. Others found themselves fired because their superiors had been put under pressure and threatened by government officials to let them go.

One particular case illustrates the disdain the Chinese government has for its own laws, and how it feels threatened by the few who are trying to hold the government accountable for its decisions, and make China a better country. This case is about human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng. Gao was detained one year ago, on February 4, 2009. His crime? He defended persecuted Christians and others who have been abused by the Chinese government for their beliefs. Gao had been arrested before, tortured, and released under threats not to talk about his treatment. Courageously, he nevertheless revealed details about his case, which can easily be found on the Internet. Whereas his close family was able to take refuge in the United States last year, grave concerns about Gao's health and possible further torture remain until today. Incredibly, the Chinese government refused to reveal any information whatsoever for more than a year now about where Gao is being held and what his current status is. He has simply disappeared in Chinese custody, without access to the outside world, a defence lawyer, or his own family, and without any legal proceedings, never mind a set date for a trial. But despite a petition signed by 100,000 people presented to the Chinese embassy in the United States and continued pressure about Gao's case on the Chinese government, the latter is still stonewalling. With impertinence, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ma Zhaoxu publicly acknowledged Gao's case to the media in January: "The relevant judicial authorities have decided this case, and we should say this person, according to Chinese law, is where he should be."

So does Canada care? Usually, politicians focus on the more obvious controversies around China, such as Tibet or Darfour. Looking at the US, it is easy to understand that the Obama administration wants to be seen as an agent of peace, distinguishing itself from the previous one. Yet, after Hillary Clinton announced last year that concern for the protection of human rights of the Chinese people can't 'interfere' with the economic crisis, climate change, and security, she was heavily criticized for her very low-key approach towards human rights in China. Still, President Obama cancelled a meeting with the Dalai Lama in October 2009 due to pressure by the Chinese government. Now, in February 2010, he seems adamant about finally having this meeting. Barack Obama received the Noble Peace Prize last year, but still has to prove in practice that he deserved it. On the other hand, people like Bob Fu of human rights organization China Aid continue to put salt into the wounds of the Chinese dragon. Recognizing that the root of the Chinese problem lies beneath what meets the eye, U.S. Congressmen nominated Gao Zhisheng this year for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Peace Prize is certainly much more political than the Olympics are, and an award would put the Chinese government in a very awkward situation.

Despite having been accused of violating human laws itself, the US remains the principal nation crying out about injustice around the world. On the other hand, Canada, which is in a much better position and has an almost spotless human rights record, rarely ever makes its voice heard loudly. China is our trading partner, interested in minerals and metals, oil, and lately also dimensional lumber. Previous calls about a political boycott of the Beijing games due to human rights issues were ignored by our government, as could be expected. As we now host the Winter Games, it is again unlikely that the Canadian government will use this opportunity to put pressure on China, for example by banning government representatives from visiting, refusing to meet them, or exposing human rights issues when meeting them. In doing so, Canada is failing in its great responsibility to stand up for what it believes in. History tells us that silence and appeasement does not bring about change in countries that bully human rights. During the past two years, we have observed that Beijing is completely unwilling to join the 21st century. Instead, it continues to wage a Cold War against its very own citizens. Yet, Canada is standing by and watches.

This February, we welcome the Chinese athletes visiting our country, as we have also welcomed Chinese immigrants for a century. We can distinguish between Chinese citizens and their government. Sadly, our elected officials do not have the courage or will to deal with that government as they should. The next two weeks will only confirm that. Only, in this case, I would really love to be proven wrong.

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