

8.14 China's Charter 08 Manifesto (2008)

Background: Charter 08 was a political manifesto signed by over 300 Chinese intellectuals and human rights activists challenging authoritarian one-party rule by the Chinese Communist Party. Because of his involvement, Liu Xiaobo, one of the manifesto's authors, was arrested and sentenced to eleven years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power." In 2010 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Since the manifesto was issued in 2008, more than 10,000 people inside and outside China have signed it.

Instructions: Read the excerpts from the preamble (1) and conclusion (2) to the China's Charter 08 Manifesto and answer 1- 3.

Questions

1. What is the primary demand of the authors and signers of Charter 08?
2. Why are the authors and signers of Charter 08 so insistent on their demands?
3. Why do they believe that China has a special responsibility to change?

1. This year [2008] is the 100th year of China's Constitution, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 30th anniversary of the birth of the Democracy Wall [in Beijing], and the 10th year since China signed the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. After experiencing a prolonged period of human rights disasters and a tortuous struggle and resistance, the awakening Chinese citizens are increasingly and more clearly recognizing that freedom, equality, and human rights are universal common values shared by all humankind, and that democracy, a republic, and constitutionalism constitute the basic structural framework of modern governance. A "modernization" bereft of these universal values and this basic political framework is a disastrous process that deprives humans of their rights, corrodes human nature, and destroys human dignity. Where will China head in the 21st century? Continue a "modernization" under this kind of authoritarian rule? Or recognize universal values, assimilate into the mainstream civilization, and build a democratic political system? This is a major decision that cannot be avoided.

2. China, as a great nation of the world, one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and a member of the Human Rights Council, should contribute to peace for humankind and progress in human rights. But to its people's regret, among the great nations of the world, China, alone, still clings to an authoritarian political way of life. As a result, it has caused an unbroken chain of human rights disasters and social crises, held back the development of the Chinese people, and hindered the progress of human civilization. This situation must change! The reform of political democratization can no longer be delayed. Because of this, we, with a civic spirit that dares to act, publish the "Charter 08." We hope that all Chinese citizens who share this sense of crisis, responsibility and mission, without distinction between the government or the public, regardless of status, will hold back our differences to seek common ground, actively participate in this citizens' movement, and jointly promote the great transformation of the Chinese society, so that we can establish a free, democratic and constitutional nation in the near future and fulfill the dreams that our people have pursued tirelessly for more than a hundred years.

Follow-Up: Examine the fundamental concepts and political demands of the Chinese Charter 08 Manifesto online.

1. What other historical documents does the charter take ideas from? Explain.
2. Which of the fundamental concepts do you consider most essential to a democratic society? Explain.
3. A seventeen step political program for change is identified in the section titled "Our basic standpoint." Select the three points you consider most crucial for a democratic society. Explain why you made these choices.
4. Do you feel the United States lives up to these principles? Explain.
5. Would you sign this document knowing that you might be sentenced to prison for your beliefs? Explain.