What is the buzz all about?

Chinese Ambassador Mr. Qiang Wei speaks with the Barbados Advocate on this year’s Nobel Peace Prize

This year’s Nobel Peace Prize has created quite an argument between Western countries and China, with the former supporting the Norwegian Nobel Committee’s decision as an encouraging signal to democracy advocates and human rights activists in China and the latter angrily criticizing “Western hostile elements” ill-portraying China as an all but totalitarian regime and treating it unfairly by awarding a convicted prisoner.

The Barbados Advocate interviewed Mr. Qiang Wei, Chinese Ambassador to Barbados, asking him his view on this latest “China-West clash”.

Advocate: Mr. Ambassador, why is China so upset about this year’s Nobel Peace Prize choice?

Ambassador Wei: Well, there have been quite a lot of reports, comments and opinions from different standpoints focusing on this event. I think China’s strong opposition to that decision is thoroughly justified, not least because China is a sovereign country and it is not a country with a system of political or economic development.

I don’t think we have a political system that has led to the support of a stable and sustainable economic and social development. We believe that China’s political system is not just an empty framework hanging out there for the sake of being there, but serves a purpose, doesn’t it?

The well-being of a nation - and hence, its political system - should be judged by the extent to which it serves that purpose. Why don’t they, or many of them, deliberately blur this common sense? This is as though economic and social progress there could be separated from an overarching political system?

Advocate: So basically you are saying China’s political system has no problem and you guys in the West better just keep your doctrine to yourselves?

Ambassador Wei: Absolutely not. I’m not trying to say China’s system is perfect, needs not to be continuously improved and that we simply refuse to learn from the West; quite the contrary.

A lot of governance improvement-related dialogue and experience-exchange programmes have been developed between China and Western countries at various levels, to the satisfaction of the two sides. And I myself grew up witnessing China making big headway in democratic policy-making, in ensuring people’s right to know, to participate, to express, to supervise in the rule of law and in the international human rights co-operation.

I have no doubt about my country’s commitment to further developing democracy and human rights, not for accommodating foreign pressure, but out of our own need. However, we also know all too well that in doing so, it is vitally important for China to follow our own reality and path, which is not exactly the same as that of a highly developed Western country like Norway.

Advocate: But is Liu Xiaobo in prison because of his political beliefs or not? If so, does it mean the Chinese people just have no freedom of expression granted like in other parts of the world?

Ambassador Wei: When it comes to the other major issue at stake, which is: Is this about freedom of expression or the rule of law?

The “freedom of expression” was too often politicised in the Cold War. Now that the world has long passed over that ideology and ended off, this fundamental freedom should no longer be judged from an ideologically point of view or, worse, from a biased ideological viewpoint. After over 30 years of reform and opening up, China is now already a vibrant society where the world’s top publishers with over 2,000 newspapers and over 9,000 magazines, and who are home to over 200 million blogs, where more than 4 million blog entries or comments are made every day, and where the Chinese cyberspace is the most populous ground for expression in the world.

Apart from that, nowadays as many as over 50 million Chinese travel abroad every year; and about the same number of foreigners are streaming in and out of China constantly, lots of them residing on a permanent basis in China. Under such circumstances, how can anyone honestly believe this is a fear-filled and coerced society where people don’t enjoy freedom of expression? Now, another thing is undermining national security by abusing the freedom of expression. The border does exist, not only in China, but in most. It is a pity. That’s what I’m saying.

Advocate: So do you believe this Nobel Peace Prize issue has been a plot against China?

Ambassador Wei: Well, these are not my words. I myself just don’t understand really what they are up to. What I can tell you is that Mr. Geir Lundestad, Secretary-General of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, recently admitted in the UK that the Committee’s choice for 2010 was indeed targeted at China.

So, you see, there must be two decades after the end of the Cold War that was supposed to end ideological divide, a prize for peace set up by Mr. Alfred Nobel over a century ago is still used as a political tool to trample countries deemed “different.”

It is such a pity. That’s what I’m saying.