

Senator Ted Kennedy: a true friend of Taiwan

Written by Mark Chen 陳明

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The passing of US Senator Ted Kennedy on Aug. 25 brings back many memories of his actions in the late 1970s and early 1980s in support of Taiwan's democracy.

The senator's interest in Taiwan was prompted by contact with the Taiwanese-American community in the mid-1970s. His leadership was most prominent after the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident, when the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) authorities arrested virtually all leaders of the democratic opposition. His office often and openly expressed his concerns to the KMT government about the human rights of the detained political leaders.

In retrospect, we can say that during the dark days after the Kaohsiung Incident, Senator Kennedy demonstrated to us that there is no international boundary when it comes to human rights. It was an opportunity for we Taiwanese to have a close look at — and appreciate — his deeply held beliefs in fundamental values we share with the US.

Together with Democratic Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island and representatives Jim Leach (an Iowa Republican) and Stephen Solarz (a New York Democrat), Senator Kennedy then played a key role in Taiwan's transition to democracy. We referred to him and his colleagues as our "Gang of Four." His strong sense of justice and his keen desire to side with the weak and disenfranchised made him stand up for human rights and democracy when it counted.

The Taiwanese people will always be thankful to him for calling attention to the lack of democracy and to the fact that in the early 1980s, Taiwan still lived under martial law, which had been in force since 1949.

On May 20, 1982, on the occasion of 33 years of martial law, he said: "It is clear that too many citizens are jailed in Taiwan for expressing their political views and defending their human rights. I therefore call on the leadership of Taiwan to take immediate action to release political and religious prisoners and to improve the human rights situation on the island."

He often called on the KMT to release the political and religious leaders who were imprisoned after the Kaohsiung Incident, including Reverend Kao Chun-ming (高俊明) of the Presbyterian Church, and then Provincial Assembly member Lin Yi-hsiung (林義雄), whose mother and two of three daughters were murdered while Lin was in prison. The case is yet to be solved.

Kennedy was also concerned about Taiwan's future. On Feb. 28, 1983, he and senators Claiborne Pell, John Glenn and David Durenberger introduced a resolution in the US Senate urging "that Taiwan's future should be settled peacefully, free of coercion and in a manner acceptable to the people of Taiwan." The initiative demonstrated Kennedy's vision for Taiwan and its future.

In the early 1980s Senator Kennedy also played a leading role in legislation alloting a

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separate immigration quota of 20,000 for Taiwan. This had been “lost” when — after the US derecognized the KMT government as the government of China and established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China on Jan. 1, 1979 — Taiwan was lumped together with China for immigration quota purposes.

The efforts by Kennedy and his colleagues in Congress helped bring about Taiwan’s transition to democracy and strengthened the democratic opposition, which coalesced and led to the formation of the Democratic Progressive Party in September 1986, and the end of martial law in 1987. However, it wasn’t until 1992 that democratic elections were held for all seats in the Legislative Yuan, and not until 1996 that Taiwanese were able to directly elect their own president.

The people of Taiwan fondly remember Senator Kennedy as one who stood with them throughout one of the most difficult periods of Taiwan’s history. We will dearly miss him.

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