

Taiwan's past haunting textbooks

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Ministry of Education's new curriculum guidelines for the 12-year national education system suggest that Taiwan's authoritarian past still haunts the nation, and cast doubt on the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government's competence and resolve to consolidate democracy.

Transitional Justice Commission member Hua Yih-fen (華以芬) on Friday said that the commission has found four flaws in the new guidelines, which the ministry plans to implement in September next year: romanticizing the party-state era; a lack of content on the Holocaust, the 228 Incident and the ensuing White Terror era as mandatory classes for high-school students; and statements that suggest the pursuit of transitional justice is potentially divisive.

These suggest that while Taiwan's one-party state days are over, many educators still harbor scraps of the party-state ideology and did not part ways with authoritarian mindsets and practices.

High-school students in 2015 protested against the ministry's controversial adjustments to high-school curriculum guidelines that critics said reflected a "China-centric" view.

The DPP at the time stood with the student protesters as it campaigned on a platform of democratic values ahead of the presidential and legislative elections the next year.

So it is doubly regrettable that, despite the protests and the DPP now controlling both the executive and legislative branches of government, the ministry chose to stay in the same old rut by allowing authoritarian ideology to creep into textbooks with attempts to glorify the party-state era, while neglecting, if not twisting, transitional justice efforts and the White Terror era.

Some were quick to come to the government's defense by saying that many of the educators are themselves victims of the party-state dogma of the former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime and more time is needed for them to "detoxify" themselves from the decades of brainwashing they were subjected to.

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That might well be the case, but it does not stop people from doubting the President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) administration's competence in achieving transitional justice.

Education is a crucial element of transitional justice and the new guidelines should reflect the depth and understanding of the nation's democratization, and teach the younger generation about the blood, sweat and tears shed by Taiwan's democracy pioneers.

At least, that is what the guidelines should do, if the government is sincere in its efforts to achieve transitional justice.

In April, at a commemoration event for late democracy activist Deng Nan-jung (鄧南仲), Tsai once again stressed the importance of transitional justice, saying: "It is the most important step following the democratization of Taiwan."

Tsai has proved that she can talk the talk, but can she back her words with concrete action?

Granted, the government has passed the Act on Promoting Transitional Justice (促進轉型正義法) and established the Transitional Justice Commission, but the new guidelines suggest that Taiwan is still a fragile democracy where ghosts of the one-party state era linger in school hallways and achieving substantial transitional justice remains elusive.

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