

'228' is not just 'history' for Taiwan

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The decision to link the belated reopening of a national museum on the February 28th Incident of 1947 with the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of China is likely to become a pretext for the sanitation of the role of the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) in the most traumatic event in Taiwan's modern history.

The brutal suppression of a spontaneous uprising to protest the corrupt and incompetent rule of the rightist KMT regime shortly after its takeover of Taiwan in October 1945 after 50 years of Japanese colonialism cost the lives of over 10,000 Taiwanese, including many outstanding intellectual, political, legal and social leaders.

The incident, discussion of which was a taboo under the following four decades of KMT-imposed martial law, left searing wounds of political fear, personal and family tragedy and ethnic division have yet to fully heal.

The "228 Memorial Foundation" has long been seen by the KMT camp as a thorn in its eye, especially since its publication of a report by historians and legal experts in February 2006 that cited declassified presidential documents to identify the late KMT dictator Chiang Kai-shek as "the person most responsible" for the massacres that followed his order to KMT military forces to suppress the island-wide movement and "restore order."

In retaliation, the KMT-controlled Legislative Yuan froze budgets for the foundation and a long-awaited National 228 Memorial Museum, which was formerly opened on the 60th anniversary of the incident by former Democratic Progressive Party president Chen Shui-bian.

However, the vindictive budget cuts have left the museum closed and halted maintenance of its premises in the 112-old former home of the Japanese era "Taiwan Educational Society" on Nanhai Road.

Speaking to the annual commemoration of the 228 massacre in Kaohsiung on February 28, President (and now KMT Chairman) Ma Ying-jeou promised to pressure his party's legislative caucus to restore the budget for the museum and ensure the sustained role for the foundation, which was responsible for administrating programs for the official reparations to victims and

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surviving relatives and historical research and educational activities.

In this light, the announcement by new "228 Memorial Foundation" Chairman Chan Chi-hsien that the National 228 Museum will be "opened" (actually reopened) on February 28, 2010 last week in his first meeting with local news media since replacing former doctor, community organizer and state minister Chen Jin-huan in September, is most welcome.

Chan, formerly president of the Chi Mei Hospital in Tainan City and now board chairman of the Kuo Kwang Biotechnology Company, is undoubtedly well rooted and widely respected in Taiwan society, but was also an outspoken supporter of Ma's presidential campaign.

However, Chan's statement that the foundation should pursue the "honest" truth behind the 228 Incident "free from partisan color" and similar statements by members of the foundation's new board members in their first meeting on September 15 give considerable cause for concern about the future direction of the foundation and its role in "redefining" the place of "228" in Taiwan's history under the influence of the restored KMT government.

Most of the 228 victims or surviving family members on the board are advocates of a so-called "new discourse" that "leaves the tragedy and pain" of the February 28th Incident "in the past" and "aims to realize the greatest common denominator" with "more tolerance and forgiveness" and "less controversy."

Moreover, with one or two exceptions, the new board members are known adherents of either Ma's definition of the incident as "revolt by the people against corrupt officials" or as just one of the innumerable tragedies during the Chinese civil war between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party.

Moreover, the foundation's decision by the board to link the reopening of the 228 museum with the ROC centenary commemorations will locate "228" in a "China-centric" discourse instead of approaching the incident from the standpoint of how it was perceived by the Taiwan people at that time and how it impacted Taiwan society which was a passive victim and not a participation in the KMT-CCP civil war.

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In addition, the imposition of a "China-centric" location or its definition as a "revolt sparked by corrupt officials" or an inevitable "tragedy" in a "civil war" aims to set aside the finding by the 2006 report that the "228 Massacre" was "a state crime" by the KMT regime and thus allow the latter to evade its moral and even legal responsibility under the concept of "transitional justice."

Moreover, the notion of "honest" history of the "228" or the subsequent "white terror" free from political bias is a chimera, especially since the KMT itself was the perpetrating party.

We hope the new leadership of the "228 Foundation" will take an active role in striving for transitional justice and pushing Ma and the KMT to release all of the files on these events held by government and KMT party archives and defend Taiwan's hard-won democracy and independence for which so many thousands died.

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