

Kaohsiung Incident remembered

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Thirty years after military police clashed with supporters of the democracy movement in Kaohsiung, the event still evoked strong emotions and memories in academics, witnesses and political leaders yesterday at a forum held to mark the protest known as the “Kaohsiung Incident.”

Lee Shiao-feng (李蕭楓), a professor at National Taipei University of Education’s Graduate School of Taiwan Culture and a long-time pro-independence activist, recounted his experience as a participant in the Incident, saying the streets were filled with protesters eager to see political change and an end to authoritarian rule.

“It wasn’t a single Incident — it was the culmination of 20 to 30 years of the pro-democracy movement,” Lee told the forum in Taipei. “The people rebelled against an authoritarian government ... the more [protesters] the [government] arrested, the more people came out to support [the protest].”

The Incident started when the pro-democracy Formosa Magazine (自由時報) held a demonstration commemorating International Human Rights Day on Dec. 10, 1979, in Kaohsiung, calling on then-Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government to respect human rights and demanding democracy. Within hours, the protesters were surrounded by scores of military police, while prominent leaders of the democracy movement were arrested.

Of the 51 arrests made, eight, including Shih Ming-teh (史明), Chang Chun-hsiung (張俊雄), Annette Lu (呂秀蓮) and Chen Chu (陳菊), were tried in a military court and received sentences ranging from 12 years to life imprisonment. The remaining 43 were tried in civilian courts and received two to seven-year sentences.

At the forum yesterday, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) praised the protesters for their dedication and sacrifice in leading the nation to a democratic transition.

“In the 30 years since the Incident, many things have changed ... but their dedication to our nation and its democracy has not,” Tsai said. “Their sacrifices have allowed us as a society to develop and increased our own recognition of this country.”

She said that it was because of the dissidents that pressure grew on the government to eventually lift martial law and lift the bans on independent political parties and media, which led to the country’s democratization.

Tsai is one of the few people to have held the chair of the DPP without having been either a defendant or lawyer involved in the Incident.

Other participants in the Incident, such as defense lawyers Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) and Frank

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Hsieh (謝) went on to become president and premier respectively, while defendant Annette Lu, who was sentenced to 12 years in prison, later became vice president.

“Thirty years ago, we gathered to let the KMT know that we wanted the fate of our nation to be decided by us, the Taiwanese ... we wanted change and expressed it through a popular movement,” Lu said, adding that “the lessons of that day are every bit as important today.”

The Kaohsiung City Government is planning a series of activities to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Kaohsiung Incident to be held until Dec. 20, including seminars on human rights, a photo exhibition, a concert and a party.

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