

Taiwan 'free,' but civil liberties at risk: report

Written by Taipei Times

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Taiwan has maintained its status as one of the world's freest countries, but its score for civil liberties was downgraded over flaws in protection of the rights of criminal defendants, Freedom House said in a report released on Tuesday.

While Taiwan's overall rating in the Freedom in the World 2010 report was the same as last year, its score for political rights advanced from grade 2 to grade 1 because of an increased crackdown on corruption.

On the other hand, Taiwan's score for civil liberties slid from grade 1 to grade 2 because of flaws in the protection of the rights of defendants as evidenced in the handling of corruption cases involving former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) and his close aides.

Arch Puddington, director of Freedom House's research department, said Taiwan generally performed well in promoting political freedom and deserved praise as one of "democracy's stars" in East Asia.

Flaws in the handling of corruption cases of the former president led to concerns, however, that Taiwan's rule of law "may be twisted a bit," he said.

"In Taiwan, increased government efforts to enforce anticorruption laws were marred by flaws in the protection of criminal defendants' rights, and new legislation restricting the political expression of academics," the Washington-based human rights watchdog body wrote in the report.

It said the decline in Taiwan's civil liberties rating was "due to flaws in the protection of criminal defendants' rights that were exposed during the anticorruption prosecutions and a high-profile murder case, as well as a law that infringes on academic freedom by barring staff and scholars at public educational facilities from participating in certain political activities."

It also said that the improvement in Taiwan's score for political rights was "due to enforcement of anticorruption laws that led to the prosecution of former high-ranking officials, the annulment of several legislators' election owing to vote-buying, and the investigation of over 200 candidates for alleged vote-buying in local elections."

Freedom House has released a Freedom in the World report annually since 1972. The report evaluates a country's degree of freedom based on two indicators — political rights and civil liberties — with each measured on a scale of one to seven.

Of the 194 countries surveyed in this year's report, 89 were listed as "free," 58 "partly free" and 47 "not free."

Of 14 other disputed or trust territories, Puerto Rico received the best score for both indicators, while Tibet got the worst score for both.

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