

The most intriguing part of Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng's (陳光誠) trip to Taiwan so far was his brief visit to the legislature on Tuesday. Lawmakers tangled and disagreed on the podium, but chanted in sync to welcome Chen, without leaving their positions.

When later asked, Chen said he loved it because that was what democracy is all about — there will never be only one voice.

The 41-year-old activist, who fled China for the US last year, had this short, yet powerful message to Taiwanese: "It is better to have fighting in parliament than to see tanks on the streets," referring to China's 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, during which Beijing used tanks to suppress protesters.

"If Hong Kong fails to transplant the rule of law to China, Beijing will eventually bring the rule of man to Hong Kong. If Taiwan does not help democratize China, the authoritarian system of government will someday return to intimidate Taiwan," Chen said.

A maturing democracy such as Taiwan's needs people like Chen, who pray that someday democracy will take root in China and has risked his life to realize that dream.

President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), who always says he upholds universal rights and values, declined to meet the activist. The same goes for Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmakers, who, with the exception of Apollo Chen (陳昭如), all avoided meeting Chen at the legislature.

While no one is obligated to meet the Chinese dissident, the absence of these politicians, including former premier Frank Hsieh (許信良) of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), suggests a hidden political calculation — they fear antagonizing Beijing.

Like elsewhere in the world, meetings between political leaders and Chinese dissidents are a benchmark of how politicians keep a balance between supporting human rights and political interaction with Beijing.

Cross-strait human rights dilemma

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However, let us not dwell on who Chen has and has not met. The activist's landmark visit serves as a reminder to Taiwanese how the nation's hard-won democracy can serve to inspire Chinese more than we could have imagined and why Taiwanese political parties must differentiate between the government in Beijing and the 1.3 billion Chinese.

The arrival of Chen, who had to endure harassment, torture and imprisonment for his advocacy of human rights in China, reminds Taiwanese of the martyrs who sacrificed their freedom and lives during the White Terror era for democracy, but were never able to enjoy the recognition that Chen has received. Most remain relatively unknown to this day.

Meanwhile, the focus on human rights has coincided with proposals initiated by Taiwan Democracy Watch, an academic group which advocates human rights as the foundation of cross-strait engagement, and a group of DPP politicians, who called on the party to initiate a resolution on cross-strait human rights exchanges, as well as DPP Chairman Su Tseng-chang's (蘇貞昌) pledge that the DPP would not only engage with the Chinese Communist Party regime, but also Chinese civic groups.

Chen's support of China's "one country, two systems" formula stirred up controversy until it became clear that what he in fact supports is Chinese people's right to choose between a democracy and authoritarianism.

Now, a new debate has broken out among Taiwanese after Chinese media criticized Chen, suggesting that making human rights the basis of cross-strait engagement would lead to a fragile cross-strait relationship.

That leads to another question: Are human rights and politics separate issues in terms of the cross-strait relationship?

People on both sides of the Taiwan Strait await the answer.

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