

## Take a stand against police abuse

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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Amid growing public discontent with government policies and wave after wave of public protests, law enforcement authorities are under severe strain and have on occasion gone overboard in their duties, which has prompted a large number of lawyers and human rights organizations to step in.

Almost every day in recent months, the news has been filled with footage of protesters — from university students to elderly citizens — clashing with police over a number of controversies.

For weeks now, the Legislative Yuan has been under siege, while Cabinet officials have been the targets of flash protests all over the country, their visits turning the venues into high-security zones surrounded by large police deployments. In some instances, the National Security Bureau has even stepped in. Special zones have been created where protesters are hemmed in and with growing frequency police have requested that ordinary citizens show their identity documents whenever they approach a “restricted” zone. In some cases, refusal to do so has led to a visit to the local police station.

The sense of oppression has increased and with it the fear of a return to past practices under authoritarian rule. Young men whose only crime was to wear a red T-shirt — a color associated with several civic movements — have been swarmed by police officers who suspected they were participants in a protest, when in fact they were heading for a bus station near the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) headquarters.

Other cases have been less amusing, with protesters being dragged away, arrested, harassed and physically injured. In Miaoli County, which has a particularly bad reputation, and where a German firm is erecting wind turbines, abuse by police and thugs have been especially notorious.

After observing recent developments, a large number of lawyers are saying they have seen enough and are compelled to take action. Dozens of them assembled in front of the Ministry of Justice yesterday to deliver a petition signed by as many as 1,000 lawyers, which represents about a fifth of the total in the country. Many of them are giving their time, free of charge, to defend victims of abuse by law enforcement officials and they are pressuring the government to remedy the situation. The substantial numbers are an indication of the seriousness of the situation.

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However, the alarm, though justified, should be put in perspective. The majority of police officers in Taiwan are professional and kind. Efforts are also being made by the police force in Taipei to reach out to and assist foreign journalists covering recent clashes. A good number of police have also expressed sympathy for the causes behind the protests and have intervened when activists risked getting injured.

However, there are overzealous officers who are sully the reputation of the force, and there are also signs of great pressure from above calling on police to act in ways that risk crossing certain lines.

Another development that could lead to serious problems is that the large number of protests is forcing law enforcement authorities to call upon police from outside their jurisdiction for assistance. When this happens, the bonds that have developed between protesters and police officers over months are severed, and the resultant lack of familiarity has had a demonstrable impact on the willingness of police officers to use force against activists.

As more and more police are brought in from outside, and with large protests expected this month — again over issues of land theft, forced evictions and demolitions of people's homes — the potential for further violence and serious injuries is something that everybody involved will have to bear in mind.

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