

Taiwanese and the banality of evil

Written by Lee Min-yung 李敏勇

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A film about political theorist Hannah Arendt is currently showing in theaters. Arendt was a renowned thinker with a great insight into the human mind: the thinking, willpower and judgment of people.

Premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜華) has been praised in academic circles for his outstanding research into her political theories, but his performance since his appointment as premier by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) in February has been questionable. One wonders if he, or, for that matter, any of the other people who serve this evil party-state system, has ever engaged in self-reflection.

A German Jew, Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, was a collection of her reports on the trial of Nazi lieutenant colonel Adolf Eichmann — a war criminal who was one of the major organizers of what the Nazis called “the final solution,” the extermination of Jews.

In Arendt's view, Eichmann was an example of “the banality of evil.” The question is how we should go about determining political accountability and issuing a sentence?

“The banality of evil” and “banality and evil” are two different concepts. When explaining the collective guilt that takes place under totalitarianism, Arendt explained the complicity she observed by using the idea of people being cogs in a machine as a metaphor: “the banality of evil” and “banality and evil.” Those in power under an authoritarian rule serve as examples.

Complicity and access to spoils are the two most relevant concepts in analyzing the party-state capitalist system under the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) rule.

Much of the complicity of those participating in the KMT's government structure derives from the fact that they are cogs relying on the regular turning of others within that structure. They behave like this because they share the same interests, rather than because they share the same thoughts or beliefs. Does Ma have any thoughts, and if he does, what are those thoughts?

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Despite having studied Arendt's political theories, Jiang has been absorbed into the banality of evil that she criticized and he does not seem to feel ashamed of the fact. Why is he so banal? Why so evil? Is this a result of the colonial rule syndrome or is it because he is trying to consolidate the party led by Ma and therefore has to do anything Ma says? Does he not have his own ideas, willpower and judgement? Is he trying to shirk his responsibility as a human being?

Originally, "the banality of evil" was a concept describing the collective guilt of the Nazis participating in the extinction of the Jews, but it also applies to the many Taiwanese who have chosen to share power and interests with the KMT under its rule after World War II. These people do not think and they lack a sense of responsibility and judgment. Have you not seen how many people are quite comfortable with their complicity and their allotment of the spoils?

As a society lacking accountability and shame, an evil and banal society, and a society where "the banality of evil" and "banality and evil" continues to exist, how can Taiwan be a great country?

Lee Min-yung is a poet.

Translated by Eddy Chang

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