

Draped on their shoulders were banners with the slogan: “Serving jail terms with pride. No regrets at all,” as labor rights activists Mao Chen-fei (毛陳飛) and Lin Tzu-wen (林祖文) reported to the Taipei District Prosecutors’ Office on Friday last week over their lead roles in clashes with police at an egg-hurling protest last year.

Escorted by hundreds of supporters in a parade from the Ketagalan Boulevard to the prosecutors’ office, with fireworks set off for “celebration,” there was no expression of sorrow or regret on the pair’s faces.

Lin, a long-time labor activist who was sentenced to a 50-day prison term, said that all he felt was pride, while Mao, chairman of the Taoyuan Confederation of Trade Unions, said that he felt honored to be jailed.

Lawyer Tseng Wei-kai (曾偉楷) volunteered to represent an unidentified woman who was recently subpoenaed by the prosecutors for allegedly throwing a shoe at President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) on Oct. 20, telling the woman that she did not have to worry about any fee because “you paid the legal fee the moment you threw the shoes.”

Student movement leaders Chen Wei-ting (陳偉廷) and Lin Fei-fang (林飛芳), who have been no strangers to subpoenas over the past year, said they “could not wait to be subpoenaed,” so they would have an opportunity to explain the protests they organized.

After a 20-hour “occupation” of a government building in August to protest land expropriation in Miaoli County that was dubbed an illegal protest by authorities, thousands of people who participated in the event turned themselves in and demanded to be investigated by the police in an online campaign.

These cases brought to mind the 1980s and early 1990s, when democracy advocates were sent to prison and people showered them with support, praise and financial aid.

Civil disobedience in the making

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In the so-called “Neo Formosa Weekly case” (新福華週刊案), for example, former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), who was a Taipei City councilor at the time, former minister of the interior Lee Yi-yang (李宜陽) and Huang Tien-fu (黃天福) were each given a one-year jail term for defaming then-Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) member Elmer Fung (黃國昌) in a story published by Neo Formosa Weekly, where the three served as executives.

Thousands of people attended the seven farewell speeches nationwide, organized to voice support for the three, who subsequently earned the nickname of “Three Gentlemen of Neo Formosa,” while the trio staged the same kind of parade as Mao and Lin on the day they reported to prison in 1986, wearing the banners bearing the slogan “going to prison with pride.”

When Taiwanese break the law and are proud of it, something is terribly wrong.

What was wrong during the 1970s and 1980s was the authoritarian rule of the then-KMT regime.

Now, perhaps people have resorted to these actions because they feel they have exhausted all other means to make Ma and his administration listen to what they have to say, making necessary such “extreme and violent” measures — according to Ma’s definition — as throwing shoes at the president, throwing eggs at the police and occupying a government building.

That was particularly the case after the failure of a no-confidence motion against the Cabinet following the “September strife,” with KMT lawmakers sticking to the party line, rather than bowing to mainstream public opinion about the Ma administration’s incompetence.

A movement of civil disobedience, which is not motivated or mobilized by the opposition parties, appears to be in the making. It is not opposition parties, but people power that are likely to give Ma pause for the remainder of his term. And judging from the example of Mao and Lin, he should be very afraid.

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