

Having closely observed Taiwanese politics for well over two decades, I do not expect to be surprised by political developments there. Taiwanese politics are certainly never boring. That is why it is such a wonderful topic to research and teach. After a period of relative calm, one of the most noteworthy developments of the past six years has been the resurgence of its social movements. At a time when there is growing alienation from mainstream political parties, civil society is playing a growing and critically important role in Taiwanese democracy. However, the student occupation of the legislature showed how Taiwanese politics retains the ability to surprise.

Seeing pictures of the student occupation and also key figures from the Wild Lily student movement outside the legislature made me think of historical comparisons. The Wild Lily Student movement of 1990 was critically important for a number of reasons. It helped the nation move toward a blueprint for democratization. Equally important, though, was that it represented a huge boost for Taiwan's international image. Coming less than a year after the Chinese government's violent crackdown on protests in Tiananmen square, the way in which former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) met Taiwan's student protesters and engaged with their demands represented a stark contrast. While China chose suppression with tanks, Taiwan chose dialogue and democracy.

One of the major differences between protests in Taiwan and South Korea has been the relative lack of violence in the Taiwanese case. A key reason for this was the ability of the past Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regimes to defuse tensions with dialogue and gradual reforms in response to the demands of civil and political society. The adoption of direct presidential elections represents one such case.

In contrast, in recent years the government has failed to engage with society. This was first apparent in the Wild Strawberry protests of 2008 and 2009. As in 1990, the student protesters kept their distance from the main opposition party. However, the government failed to deal with the students' core demands over reform of the Parade and Assembly Act (集會遊行法). There was a similar pattern concerning the calls by the movement against media monopolization for media regulation. Once again the government failed to respond to social pressure aimed at protecting media diversity, a central asset of its democracy.

Over the past six years pressure has been building up that could have been released through dialogue. The current crisis was entirely avoidable. Students today are no more radical than those of 1990 and may well be more conservative. It seems unimaginable that students would

Importance of social movements in Taiwan

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have adopted such tactics 25 years ago. That student protesters have been willing to go to the extremes of occupying the Legislative Yuan represents a failure of political society to respond to the public.

To the outsider, it may seem hard to comprehend that so much anger has built up due to the government's refusal to review a services trade agreement. However, the root of the problem has been a gradual building up of tensions and frustration within society.

This is not the first crisis for democracy in Taiwan in recent years. The disputed election of 2004 and the "red shirt" movement of 2006 were also severe crises. Although the nation survived those incidents, it muddled through rather than dealing with the root causes through genuine political reform. The way that Taiwan deals with this current challenge will affect domestic trust in its democratic institutions and also the international reputation of its democracy. The stakes are high.

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