

Taiwan can learn from Tiananmen

Written by Joyce Huang
Tuesday, 03 June 2014 08:07

This week, it will be 25 years since the authorities in Beijing put down the student protests at Tiananmen Square. It is an important moment to reflect on what happened in those dark days. The spirit and the courage of the students still resonates with people all over the world. In commemorating June 4, 1989, we should also ask how China has changed in those 25 years, and what the lessons are for Taiwan.

In the past two decades, China has made progress in advancing living standards to raise some of the poor into the middle class and some have become wealthy. There has been rapid economic growth. People in the middle class are able to enjoy a better life. Nevertheless, in terms of political and civil rights, society remains stuck in an authoritarian mode and the rulers in Beijing refuse to acknowledge what happened in 1989.

Over the same period, Taiwan also changed very much: In 1989, it was right in the middle of a transition to democracy. The two governments, in China and Taiwan, were very similar back in the 1950s and 1960s, when both labored under authoritarian systems. Taiwan had the White Terror era, whereas China was going through the Cultural Revolution. Both governments were repressive and undemocratic.

However, in the late 1980s, Taiwan made the transition to democracy with the abolition of martial law. Ironically, in 1989 the Tiananmen Square tragedy happened, and the people on each side have gone in opposite directions since then.

Today, 25 years later, Taiwanese have achieved the fundamental rights to vote and freedom of expression. In contrast the people in China still suffer under the Chinese Communist Party's control, without free press, fair elections or checks and balances in the system of governance.

Many in China have pushed for democracy, but the developments since Tiananmen 25 years ago show this is an uphill struggle. Although the Chinese government has achieved economic growth, the rulers do not appreciate citizen participation because that undermines the power of the party.

At a recent US Congressional Hearing on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Tiananmen,

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Rowena He (何曉霞) a lecturer at Harvard, said: “There can’t be a democracy without citizens’ participation... When government keeps punishing people who are willing to participate, the effect to the society will be profound.”

The participation of citizens is one of the key elements of a healthy democracy and is also one of the distinct differences between China and Taiwan today. The Sunflower movement is a good example of the importance of active civic movements for democracy: The movement succeeded where the elected government had failed, prompting lawmakers to agree to more transparency and input from the public on the controversial cross-strait service trade agreement.

Such citizen participation keeps the government on its toes. It is important for a democratic political system to be responsive to public opinion and adjust its policies in accordance with the widely held views of the populace.

What should Taiwanese have learned 25 years after Tiananmen?

First, as a democracy, Taipei should be more supportive of Chinese human rights. Elected officials, from the president down should use any possible chance to speak out for detainees and dissidents, such as jailed Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波). Close economic ties must not prevent Taiwan from standing firm about what it believes in: freedom and human rights.

Second, Taiwanese share the responsibility of keeping the memory of human rights violations alive, not only the events of Tiananmen, but also in Taiwanese history. Especially those born after 1989, who grew up in a free and democratic system without experiencing political suppression: We need to learn about important moments in our own history, such as the 228 Massacre, the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident and Deng Nan-jung’s (鄧南雄) “Green Ribbon” movement in the mid-1980s.

So, for Taiwan today, it is important to remember the lessons of history. As a new democracy, we need to watch out for general amnesia because it is easy to backslide. We need to consolidate our political system into a more mature and stable polity with ample citizen participation. If we move in that direction, the international community should welcome Taiwan

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with open arms.

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