

Deng's freedom remains under attack

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Amid commemorations of democracy advocate Deng Nan-jung (鄧南雄), who self-immolated 26 years ago today in defense of the free expression of a desire for Taiwanese independence, it is important to reflect upon how free speech has been preserved in Taiwan since democratization.

The general perception remains strong that Taiwan protects the freedom of expression, but attention must be paid to disturbing developments that might translate into significant restrictions of the freedom.

The attempt by President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration to censor the Internet — stipulated under a proposed amendment to the National Security Act (國家安全法) that extends national security to include the Internet as a potential threat — to encourage citizens to report on any content considered threatening to national security or seen as external influence provides a prominent example.

Critics have said that the proposed amendment — which the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) legislative caucus has placed high on its agenda for this legislative session — would reincarnate the Martial Law era, when legal sanctions and social disapprobation were often used to curtail free speech.

The proposed amendment echoes the former Article 100 of the Criminal Code, which was used to charge Deng with sedition after the publication of Freedom Era Weekly (自由時代) issue No. 254, which included A Draft Republic of Taiwan Constitution, written by Koh Se-kai (高希凱) on World Human Rights Day in December 1988.

It was not until Article 100 of the Criminal Code — which criminalized even certain ideas as insurrection — was amended in May 1992, three years after Deng's death, that advocacy for Taiwanese independence became legal.

However, although championing Taiwanese independence is no longer illegal, advocates face challenges. They often encounter “thought police,” with activists described as “irrational,” “irresponsible” or “ignorant of international realities.”

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Despite the increasing public support for Taiwanese independence indicated in multiple surveys, the “thought police” have suggested politicians avoid expressions that might offend China and the US.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1999 adopted its “Resolution on Taiwan’s Future,” saying that “the future of the nation is to be determined solely by its 23 million people.” The “independence clause” is still in existence for the sake of votes, but not as an objective the party would actively pursue.

Speculation has recently re-emerged that the DPP might have a new version of the resolution that is more palatable to China and the US, as DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) apparently labored to remain politically correct by avoiding directly quoting the resolution when asked about the US’ concerns over her ability to handle cross-strait issues. Instead, Tsai employed ambiguity to avoid sensitivities.

“We understand the importance of maintaining peace and stability, but we must also maintain Taiwan’s best interests and give the current generation and beyond the most options,” she said.

Meanwhile, amid questions over how his opinion of the so-called “1992 consensus” would affect exchanges between Taipei and Shanghai, Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) proposed another perspective: No one in the world believes there are “two Chinas,” and therefore “one China” is not a problem.

The world is in a state of flux, which demands policy adjustments. However, the right to express a desire for independence, or for unification or other appeals, must be protected as 100 percent freedom of expression. This is what Deng fought for and how he is remembered.

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