

Religious groups stunt growth of democracy

Written by Andrew Cheng 陳景文
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From the very outset, the upper echelons of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation's management should have clearly defined its core mission: Does it exist to carry out charitable work or to promote religion? If the reason for raising funds from the public is for charitable work, then these donations should not be diverted for the promotion of religion, or used to construct "meditation halls" in every corner of Taiwan.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mother Teresa lived in poverty in service to the poor and never sought to establish a new religious sect. In contrast, the foundation's founding father, Master Cheng Yen (釋證嚴), vigorously promotes his own teachings, leaving one with the impression that he would like to establish himself as the figurehead of a new religious sect, or even to deify himself as the so-called "Great enlightened of the universe." And although the foundation does not — in principle — conduct business, it has clearly become a capitalist-religious organization.

Kindergarten and elementary schoolchildren who are granted an audience with Chen are asked to kowtow before him; as are journalists when they interview him. Tzu Chi University students must wear a uniform, and both the university and Tzu Chi Hospital's canteens provide only vegetarian food. All this is a clear violation of the public's freedom of choice and freedom of religious belief. The foundation seems to have forgotten that it enjoys the protection of religious freedom that is afforded to it under Taiwan's democratic system, while forcing its own brand of religion on others.

The foundation is not short of members who possess sound democratic principles; indeed they have long since been awake to this problem. One such member — a friend I greatly respect and who previously held a senior post within the foundation — told me that since the foundation's achievements outweigh its faults, he made a decision to refrain from publicly criticizing the organization.

The foundation's violations of Taiwanese democratic human rights are steadily getting worse, which led to the recent controversy over land development in Taipei's Neihu District (內湖). When civic groups and the media spoke up to protect the natural environment, a light was shone upon a plethora of undemocratic and shady financial practices and policies within the foundation. Despite its recent announcement that it will reform the board of directors and bring in independent figures, the public should continue to keep a close watch over the organization.

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Many religious groups have established schools in Taiwan. They should avoid running their schools along religious lines and should refrain from using coercive tactics to force employees, students and teachers to join their religion. Religious schools should also avoid adding mandatory classes to the general curriculum that exclusively promote the religion of the school.

The ability to investigate and compare all the religious schools in Taiwan — to determine whether there are cases of interference in the public's freedoms of speech and to practice religion — would be of immeasurable benefit to the advancement of democracy and human rights. Post-Sunflower movement, this is surely an issue that Taiwanese students should be deliberating.

The Tzu Chi Foundation problem reflects the superstitious nature of Taiwanese — especially the middle-aged and the elderly — and the poisonous legacy of 5,000 years of Chinese feudal culture. Both are the main obstacles to deepening the roots of democracy in Taiwan. Has the Tzu Chi Foundation fallen into this vice?

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Translated by Edward Jones

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