

Despite President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) repeated vows to protect the freedom of the press, the government under his leadership never ceases to surprise with how little it actually cares about the subject — with the latest example being the arrests of three journalists and the Ministry of Education's (MOE) lawsuit against them.

Protesters and journalists alike were shocked late on Thursday night when they heard the news that three journalists — one from the Liberty Times (the Taipei Times' sister newspaper) one from the online news outlet Cooloud and a freelancer — were arrested as they followed a group of students who stormed the ministry building and intruded into the minister's office.

Following their arrest, Zhongzheng First Precinct Police Chief Chang Chi-wen (張奇文) told them that they were trespassing because they had not been invited by the ministry. Later, the police said that they were arrested because the ministry was pressing charges against them — protesters and journalists alike — for trespassing. Meanwhile, Minister of Education Wu Se-hwa (吳思華) said it was the police that recommended legal action against the journalists, but that the ministry would not withdraw the lawsuit unless it could be proven that the journalists did not play a leading role in the intrusion.

It is difficult to determine exactly why the three journalists were arrested, since the police and the ministry are giving contradictory information, but whatever the real reason is, arresting journalists doing their job is unacceptable in a democracy like Taiwan — or at least in what the government claims is a democracy.

Unfortunately, it was not the first time something like this has happened.

Since Ma took office in 2008, there have been numerous incidents in which the government or the police tried to restrict journalists' right to work, especially during demonstrations.

There have been incidents when the police tried to block access to journalists, without being able to explain why or the legal basis for such moves; there have been incidents in which the police threatened charges of obstruction of law enforcement if journalists did not stay out of certain areas, even though those areas were never officially declared restricted areas; the

Freedom of press under fire

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Taipei City Police Department even wanted to designate a “press zone” at scenes of mass demonstration, and ask journalists to stay only in the zone.

Occasionally, such as during the night when thousands of demonstrators briefly occupied the Executive Yuan compound in March last year, the police have beaten journalists or removed them by force even after they showed their press cards.

Beyond all the “small tricks” that the police employ to block the media, the arrests of journalists on Thursday night was the most serious violation of the freedom of the press in recent times, and it will certainly remind people of what governments in authoritarian states, such as China or North Korea, would do.

Freedom of the press is essential in a democracy, because the media play a key role as a watchdog to prevent the government from harming the interests of the public. It is unimaginable what Taiwan would become of if media outlets are silenced due to government threats.

Most people believe that the Martial Law days are long gone, but what has happened in recent years has been worrisome, and that worry is profoundly felt by all those who work in the field of journalism.

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