

Visa rejection is a step backwards

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration's alleged refusal to issue visas to three prominent human rights activists invited to attend the first Asia-Pacific Religious Freedom Forum constitutes a step backwards for a nation that has taken pride in its endeavors to safeguard human rights.

The forum, which opened in Taoyuan yesterday and is set to run through Sunday, offers a platform where leaders of various religions and government representatives can put aside their differences and engage in open dialogue about religious pluralism and human rights.

Such dialogue is particularly imperative at the moment, given that people in many parts of the world are still subjected to discrimination, oppression and abuse because of their religious beliefs, as well as the serious and imminent threats posed by the Islamic State group, which uses religion to justify its extremist actions.

Taiwan is home to 28 religions, the newest one being Weixinism, which expounds on Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and promotes the studies of the Chinese classic I Ching (易经) and feng shui.

The nation's religious diversity and tolerance are no doubt what prompted the host organizations of the forum — including the US' Christian human rights organization China Aid, Freedom House and rights group the Lantos Foundation — to bring the event to Taoyuan.

While it might not come as a surprise, it is certainly unfortunate to learn that the Ma administration has decided not to issue visas to World Uyghur Congress president Rebiya Kadeer, Tibetan government-in-exile Prime Minister Lobsang Sangay and Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng (陳光誠).

It goes without saying that the Ma administration does not want to upset "Big Brother" China, even though doing so contradicts the very values that Taiwan stands for.

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Former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮) on Tuesday told a news conference that the grounds for the administration's refusal to issue Lobsang Sangay a visa was that his visit would be "inconvenient."

Religious freedom is one of the most fundamental human rights. If the Ma administration is willing to disregard even such a fundamental right for the sake of appeasing China, then how quickly the government would sacrifice other human rights for its own agenda — be it freedom of the press, freedom of expression or civil liberties.

Taiwanese often laud the nation's freedom and democracy, because, unlike their Chinese counterparts, these values have allowed them to live a life free of censorship and elect presidents of their own liking.

However, under the Ma's administration, there have been increasing infringements on these values, primarily because of Taipei's alarming economic dependence on Beijing, which has forced many Taiwanese businesspeople to be at China's beck and call.

The situation is especially visible in journalism, where some media outlets implement self-censorship in a desperate bid to attract advertising.

Fortunately, hopes for change have been revived as Ma's second presidential term is coming to an end.

President-elect Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) should learn from Ma's mistakes and realize that there are things far more precious than money, such as freedom and human rights.

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