

A day after a Taiwanese delegation was requested to leave a conference in Belgium due to Chinese pressure, a group of legislators met with foreign envoys in Taipei and vowed to continue the nation's efforts to protect human rights and by doing so help Taiwan engage in "human rights diplomacy."

The Parliamentary Cross-Party Group on International Human Rights was established in 2012, and with a new legislature in place, the group has been reconfigured, relaunching its operations on Tuesday. Foreign envoys said they welcomed the endeavor and called for continued cooperation on human rights issues such as gender equality, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, judicial reforms and the abolition of the death penalty.

It is an example of how the nation's soft power, even on an official level, which is often restricted outside national borders, could contribute to improving ties with nations that do not have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

The current administration should be applauded for the ratification of various international conventions such as the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, ratification is only the first step, or a sign that the nation is willing to make more commitments to the cause, including educating and familiarizing the public with the universal values that the government, representing the nation, has agreed to endorse — by possibly making courageous moves.

There have been calls after the murder of a four-year-old girl for the immediate execution of the alleged killer, who some members of the public deem — based on information in media reports — bestial and incorrigible. Some netizens have also expressed approval that Taiwanese suspects in a telecom fraud case were forcibly deported from Kenya to China — known for pitiless punishment and unquestionable authority and, of course, unjust trials, which Taiwanese conveniently forget — for they believe the alleged fraudsters would get off easily if tried in Taiwan.

In both incidences, Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmakers and Minister of Justice Luo Ying-shay (呂英祥) have failed to lead public opinion in a way that reflects the spirit of the treaties the government has ratified: Worse, they have acted in direct opposition to the ideas therein.

Human rights: The key to soft power

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The most vocal proponent of the human rights advocates in the legislatures has been Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Yu Mei-nu (游梅嬅). She and a few other DPP lawmakers have also expressed support for a proposed same-sex partnership act.

It is not surprising that the KMT is less of an active partner in these campaigns. However, will DPP lawmakers become mute following the May 20 handover of power — knowing that they now have only themselves to blame if they fail to realize their promises?

It is well understood that Taiwan faces huge problems when it comes to foreign relations — and this situation is unlikely to change any time soon. When the nation is less vociferous in its insistence on sovereignty, the world soon lapses into an unthinking endorsement of Beijing's "one China" policy; when it is more assertive about its independence and identity, its strongest ally scowls and calls it a "troublemaker."

The pressure from Beijing will surely intensify after president-elect Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) takes office — or it already has — as its reduction of Chinese tourists to Taiwan, push for forced deportations from third nations, and meddling in international conferences could indicate.

Soft power diplomacy is not limited to popular culture or entertainment, and the new government should know better than its predecessor that human rights issues are not only inherently valuable, they are the key to distinguishing Taiwan from China and could provide a powerful boost to this nation's calls for international attention and support.

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