

## The need to address historical facts

Written by Hua Yih-fen 許雪姬  
Monday, 30 May 2016 08:29

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In her inaugural address on May 20, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) had her work cut out for her. Not only did she have to address the high expectations Taiwanese have for political reform, but she also had to take on the rather grave responsibility of showing the international community how she was going to further Taiwan's democracy over the course of her presidential term. At this crucial juncture, the issue of how she would bring about transitional justice is going to be a very important test for the government.

Many Taiwanese are immigrants, or descendants of immigrants. It is only natural that the third generation of immigrants acknowledge the land in which they were born and raised as their home. This is also the experience of many other democratic nations.

The first generation would feel nostalgia for the land they left behind. The second generation would likely be influenced by the attachments their parents have for the old nation. However, the third generation is different. They would start to see the place in which they grew up — and in which they, for all intents and purposes, can imagine that they will live out the rest of their lives — as their true home.

This is a process that has come to be known in Taiwan as “natural independence.” It has nothing to do with political ideology and everything to do with whether civil society believes it has a future.

To address this trend, Tsai is the best-equipped president in Taiwan's democratic history to promote transitional justice. As such, she needs to consider how she will use transitional justice to conflate the values and core ideals of civil society and to avoid causing a second round of damage while trying to further it.

On the issue of transitional justice, two circumstances involving German Chancellor Angela Merkel are worth considering. The first was her response to a claim by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who said in a speech in October last year that during World War II, the Palestinian grand mufti of Jerusalem was the one who originally suggested the genocide of Jewish people to Adolf Hitler.

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Merkel corrected Netanyahu the very next day by saying that it was the Germans who should take responsibility for the Holocaust. Merkel's approach of facing historical facts without hesitation is one of the best guarantees that Germany is a reliable partner in the international community.

The other was Merkel's policy last summer of allowing large numbers of Syrian refugees into Germany. The policy was necessarily scaled back in the aftermath of a number of unfortunate incidents, which also damaged her standing in the polls, but the failure of the refugee policy is also due, in no small part, to the scars Germany's experience as the instigator of two world wars has left behind and passed onto later generations like a shadow hanging over them.

According to 2012 statistics, 60 percent of Germans over the age of 65 — about 16.5 million people — were potentially suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. They would easily become excessively anxious over minor things and the emotional instability would often become a negative aspect passed on to the next generation. This psychological tendency of becoming excessively anxious for no apparent reason has meant that Germany is often viewed by other Western nations as being an "angst society."

Coming back to Taiwan, and the question of transitional justice, people should encourage the perpetrators and their descendants to honestly face up to the past and see how they caused harm to others while seeking to comply with the demands of totalitarian rulers, and also to deal with their long-term reluctance to own up to the mistakes of the past.

The mistakes have, on the one hand, led to the emergence of profound obstacles and feelings of mistrust between themselves and their families and the people around them, and on the other, cast shadows and wrought psychological harm to themselves, without them actually being aware of what has happened.

Taiwanese also need to mitigate in some way the harm wrought to Aborigines, with the revoking of their rights to exist, as well as the considerable pain visited upon the victims of the 228 Massacre and the White Terror era and their relatives. There needs to be some form of political, social and economic redress so that Taiwanese can move beyond the dark period in their history.

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It is about more than just patching up the bad blood between different groups within society: It is about leaving behind a particularly pernicious collective historical memory.

With recent concerns in the international community over the increasingly illiberal direction Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party is taking the nation, people are starting to question how it could be that an authoritarian government could come to power in a nation such as Poland, which has gone through the process of transitional justice.

Many observers of the political situation in central and eastern Europe say that there are many people in Poland who are quite happy to dwell on their nation's tragic past, with all the foreign invasions it has suffered, while also ignoring their civic duty to lay the foundations of a democratic society. This interpretation is something that perhaps Taiwanese would do well to take note of.

What is done is done. There is nothing people can do to prevent tragedies that have already occurred.

However, how people handle transitional justice and the collective memory of what happened can change the way the events are looked back upon. If mistakes can be corrected or mitigated through profound reflection, people would not be necessarily locked into having a negative memory of them. Transitional justice is one way that this process of healing can happen.

If people are willing to face up to what has happened, there is no reason that this cannot be turned into a historical opportunity. Much has been said about the events, with layer upon layer of stories told from different perspectives and with different objectives: the stories of the perpetrators and of the victims, stories of reflection and of reconciliation.

People would need to unravel the knot of all the stories to reveal some kind of underlying truth at their center, and, hopefully, find some kind of consensus among it all.

It is only when people are willing to collectively acknowledge that each and every person has the right to publicly relate the harm and damage they, or the group to which they belong,

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however defined, was subjected to at the hands of the authoritarian system or state violence, that they can, together, embark upon the process of facing up to what happened in the past and successfully turn things around.

By openly addressing the historical facts and setting the historical record straight, Taiwanese can live together with mutual respect.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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