

Apology must be backed by actions

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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After becoming the first female president of Taiwan, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is tomorrow expected to become the first president to apologize to the nation's Aborigines. Let us hope that it is not just an apology, but the beginning of a series of actions to make up for the wrongs that all of the governments that have ruled over Taiwan have committed.

As the date for the apology approaches, the nation's Aboriginal communities have expressed mixed reactions, with some looking forward to it, while others are skeptical about whether the apology would actually bring about change, or be merely an empty political gesture. Some pan-green camp supporters might criticize them for their skepticism, or say that it is unsurprising, as most Aborigines are Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) supporters. Those who know the history of Taiwan's Aborigines over the past few centuries would understand why.

The Aborigines have suffered ever since the first foreign regime set foot on Taiwan.

When the Dutch came, they called for allegiance from the Aborigines, and those who refused were conquered by the Dutch military. Although the Aborigines are the first inhabitants of Taiwan, their tribal leaders had to receive certification from the Dutch to become leaders.

Then came Koxinga (鄭成功) and his troops from China. After driving away the Dutch, Koxinga's regime seized hundreds of hectares of arable land from the Aborigines so that his tens of thousands of soldiers could sustain their lives on the island.

Some of the tribes rose against Koxinga's regime, but they were violently suppressed, with some villages being completely erased and almost all of the villagers massacred.

During the rule of the Qing Empire, more Chinese settlers arrived and more Aboriginal land was taken.

Although the Qing government once set official boundaries between Aborigines and Han Chinese settlers, as Chinese settlers often crossed over the borders, the government kept on

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pushing back the boundaries into Aboriginal land.

Aborigines living in Han Chinese settlement areas — commonly known as Pingpu Aborigines — were gradually given Chinese names and many were slowly forced to give up their languages and cultures. Moreover, when armed conflict broke out between Han settlers and Aborigines, the Pingpu would be called upon to stay in the buffer zone between the Han settlers and other Aborigines to help defend the Han settlers' land — which originally belonged to the Pingpu.

During the Japanese colonial period, the government explored deeper into Aboriginal domains and eventually controlled the entire island — as well as Orchid Island (Lanyu, 蘭嶼). To the economic benefit of the Japanese Empire and capitalists, large areas of Aboriginal land were seized by the government and harvested for timber or turned into sugarcane farms, while the people were forced to give up their “uncivilized” habits and cultures.

Then came the KMT regime, which saw Aboriginal land in the mountains continuing to be harvested for timber or turned into national parks where all development is prohibited. Aboriginal land in the plains was transferred to Taiwan Sugar Co, which continued to plant sugarcane, and some became government properties or party assets.

In addition to the “tangible harm” in the decades after the KMT arrived, the Aborigines also suffered from “intangible harm” and became victims of different forms of discrimination.

If ethnic groups have suffered so much, largely due to government actions in the past centuries, why would they easily believe in yet another government?

If Tsai and her government truly mean what they promise, they should come up with concrete and sincere actions following the apology to gain the trust of the nation's Aborigines.

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