

KMT was corrupted by power, absolutely

Written by Lee Min-yung 李敏雄

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This year, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lost control of both the executive and legislative branches of government. It was not able to prevent the passage of new regulations regarding illicit party assets. Next up is legislation promoting transitional justice. Reform is a long and winding road, and there is some way to go yet.

The KMT is an unwilling participant in the process of its own political cleansing; this reluctance can be seen in news reports. The party, in its reaction to the demands of transitional justice, has been sinister and obstreperous.

Clearly, this is not going to be easy.

In 1945, the KMT took over responsibility for Taiwan on behalf of the Allies upon Japan's surrender, and it occupied Taiwan. Not two years had elapsed before the 228 Incident, in which the KMT instigated a crackdown so that its government-in-exile could clear away the cultural and political obstacles to its rule.

When it was booted out of China for good in 1949, in what Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) — who at the time was director-general of the party — referred to as “the destruction of the nation,” this was a way of putting an end to the party's troubles.

When the exiled KMT first arrived in Taiwan, it set about establishing absolute rule in the name of “rebuilding.” It did this through the application of its party-state ideology.

The 228 Incident, which came at the beginning of the party's colonial rule of Taiwan, swept away potential dissidents and any possible rivals.

Following this, there was the White Terror of the 1950s and 1960s, a cruel period where the party was prepared to do away with 100 people if it meant rooting out just one suspected communist sympathizer.

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The political entity we know as the KMT commandeered control over the state organs of the so-called Republic of China. The equation of the party with the state allowed the KMT to do as it pleased, and its tendrils permeated not only the government, but society as well.

The disease went right through to the core of the nation.

In what way was this a “democratic” republic? This was the China of the KMT; it was the commandeered territory of the Chiang dynasty. The anti-communist preoccupation was but a pretext to execute a scorched-earth policy and to consolidate the regime’s political power, while the teachings of the Institute on Policy Research and Development inculcated party members with the party-state ideology.

The KMT’s fall is perfectly encapsulated in the tried-and-tested phrase: “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

The collapse of people, of organizations, through the corrupting influence of power, has been observed countless times throughout history and is a lesson worth learning.

The KMT, which once had control over Taiwan’s politics and military, had access to unprecedented assets, but lacked a soul. Power filled the vacuum created by this lack of soul.

Participating in politics in Taiwan in the post--democratization era requires more than simply overseeing the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, it requires an ability to change and reinvent oneself that the KMT simply does not have, and this is why it ultimately collapsed and was spurned by the electorate.

It is a miracle that it has survived as long as it has, more than half a century after its exile from China in 1949.

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The legacy of this time is its all-pervading, corrupting influence on Taiwanese society, a sickness that needs a new spiritual project to heal.

Lee Min-yung is a poet.

Translated by Paul Cooper

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