

Moving past dictator worship

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Politicians across party lines often laud democracy as the nation's greatest achievement and a major asset. However, the fact that yesterday — Oct. 31 — was still observed as a public holiday commemorating Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣經國) birthday was a timely reminder to the government and the public alike that the nation is far from achieving its dream of transitional justice.

As a result of government inaction, ludicrous forms of veneration of Chiang remain across the country. Aside from observing his birth and death, statues of the dictator continue to dominate many public spaces and campuses, not to mention the most grandiose of them all — the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei — to honor the main culprit behind the 228 Massacre and the White Terror era, in which tens of thousands of Taiwanese perished.

The public has had enough after the administration of former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), which merely paid lip service to democracy.

With the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has long preached about the importance of democracy, taking over, many harbor high hopes that it would carry through the long-overdue transitional justice.

There are various steps that the government can take to prove it is serious about achieving its promise of change.

For example, rather than commemorating Chiang and observing days that are irrelevant to Taiwanese, it could designate holidays that are centered on Taiwanese consciousness and honor those who fought to bring about democracy.

It should also work to remove the vestiges of authoritarianism by eradicating worship of a totalitarian regime.

As for the CKS Memorial Hall, the government could initiate a public discussion on whether

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this public space — covering more than 25 hectares with a 76m-tall monument at the center — should remain devoted to Chiang, or be transformed into another institution, such as a research center or a museum for all of the nation's presidents, as New Power Party Legislator Hsu Yung-ming (許毓鈞) has suggested.

While some may be quick to criticize these moves as attempts to instigate polarizing conflicts, the truth is those critics have failed to keep pace with progress and changing values, are unwilling to engage in rational discussion and are stuck in an authoritarian party-state mindset.

Indeed, Taiwan should be proud of its political achievements, having earlier this year consolidated its democracy with a third peaceful transfer of political power.

However, it is ironic for Taiwan to tout itself as a model of a flourishing democracy and for Taiwanese politicians to trumpet democratic values when the nation has done little to discard authoritarian ideas and values.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has vowed to promote transitional justice and transform Taiwan into a truly free and democratic nation. If she means what she says, her administration should start by eradicating all forms of totalitarian worship that still permeates all corners of the nation.

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