

Violent protesters must be punished

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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One of the pillars of democracy is the freedom of expression, meaning everyone has the right to express their views, as well as the right to disagree.

However, when this freedom is exercised irresponsibly by failing to respect others' rights, or worse, expressing oneself in ways that are intolerant, coupled with actions that make others fear reprisals, it becomes a different story.

This is what Taiwanese witnessed at the weekend.

Upon their arrival at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport on Saturday morning to attend a political forum hosted by the New Power Party the following day, Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong (黃之鋒) and Hong Kong lawmakers Edward Yiu (游蕪池), Nathan Law (羅冠聰) and Eddie Chu (朱凱迪) were greeted with verbal abuse from hundreds of supporters of unification with China, including members of the Patriot Association (愛國民主運動聯盟) and the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中國統一促進黨).

As the lawmakers walked through the airport, several people dressed in black and wearing masks broke through a police barricade and attempted to physically assault the visitors.

Intent to attack was confirmed by CUPP Vice Chairman Tseng Cheng-hsing (曾成興), who said the protest was intended to "intimidate" the Hong Kong activist and lawmakers, who advocate democracy and autonomy for Hong Kong.

It was not the first time Taiwanese have witnessed people associated with the Patriot Association using verbal and physical abuse against those with different political opinions. In November last year, there were at least two incidents in which Taiwanese tour guides and Japanese tourists were verbally abused by members of the Patriot Association outside Taipei 101.

Everybody has the right to freedom of expression and these associations have been exercising

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their right in public places such as near Taipei 101, waving the People's Republic of China flag and handing out brochures.

They should be ashamed that they themselves enjoy freedom of expression, yet are intolerant of others' expressions of freedom.

During the past two months, there have been frequent appearances of black-clad men at public hearings held by the government on the easing of bans on food imports from five Japanese prefectures, who created disturbances by interrupting proceedings and assaulting participants.

All these incidents have a common trait: the use of intimidation and violence against people with a differing opinion. They add up to a collective assault on the nation's democracy.

A spate of "fake news" reports that government officials said could have been fabricated by Chinese netizens aiming to unnerve Taiwanese raises the question whether there is a plan to sow panic in Taiwan.

A nation of law and order that prides itself on its democratic achievements must not let incidents of this sort happen by allowing people — be they members of legally registered political groups or suspected gangsters — to use violence to oppress freedom of expression.

If the government does not come down hard on groups and individuals who espouse violence, the consequences could be severe, as frequent occurrences of this sort would harm the nation, undermining democracy and social stability.

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