

Taiwanese must find the best way to transition

Written by Chen Yi-shen 陳宜生

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While transitioning from an authoritarian state to a democracy is straightforward, what transitional process can Taiwanese follow to move from being governed by an alien regime that imposed martial law to a nation called the “Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan”?

Resolving this will depend on the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) finding sufficient common ground to arrive at a consensus.

Losing government power in 2000 and becoming the opposition party last year should help the KMT see how former KMT chairman Lien Chan (連戰) exceeded his authority and violated the shared future of Taiwanese when visiting China in 2005 to seek a path toward “unification.”

Instead of focusing on who determines how to view the Sino-Japanese War, it would be better to consider the unlikely partnership between Chinese and Taiwanese soldiers who fought off communist China together during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958.

The DPP seems to care even less about its history. Who is looking after records and photographs pertaining to its establishment in 1986? Did the party’s 1990 democracy charter advocate a parliamentary or a presidential system of government? When Peng Ming-min (彭明敏) represented the DPP in Taiwan’s first direct presidential election in 1996, what was the DPP’s internal selection process?

There is no need to catalog its history in microscopic detail, but the DPP must document key historical details to allow it to explain why, in 1996, its national congress passed the “Resolution on Taiwan’s Future,” arguing that Taiwan was an “already independent country.”

Moreover, running a country requires historical discourse. If Taiwan is a nation — regardless of its official title — then what is its territory? Does it include the Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台) and the islands in the South China Sea?

Without open-minded study, ministers will make unnecessary mistakes.

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For example, under former presidents Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國), the claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea islands was based on historic Chinese claims, but if ROC officials today — the interior minister under former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) or the foreign minister in the current administration — made claims based on the situation during the Ming Dynasty, it would no longer be appropriate: Rejecting the so-called “1992 consensus” while appealing to the “one China” principle is contradictory.

If Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu are to become a sovereign state or if the “ROC on Taiwan” is to become a reality, a lot of work must be done.

The focus of transitional justice related to the 228 Massacre and the White Terror is not to establish any dedicated institutions or to produce an authoritative report.

Instead, it is about whether the Ministry of Education will present an appropriate historical account in textbooks or whether the Ministry of Culture will transition Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. How many resources will Academia Historica put into addressing the break or continuity between the ROC and Taiwan?

How much of this discussion has been included in training at the National Academy of Civil Service or the Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs? It is understandable that the KMT would not do so, but is there any reason a DPP administration would not?

Government officials must not lock themselves in an ivory tower, but rush out to understand why Taiwanese find themselves in the current situation. This is the only way to decide the next move.

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Translated by Edward Jones and Perry Svensson

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