

From one bastion to another

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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A New York Times article published on Saturday said that Taiwan — “one of Asia’s most vibrant democracies” — has replaced Hong Kong as Asia’s “bastion of free speech.”

It is a welcome sentiment, with a few caveats.

First, it is not really new. Second, Taiwan’s status as a bastion still has a shadow over it. Third, Taiwan’s continued status as a democracy could do with some help in terms of how it is portrayed internationally. Fourth, international news agencies have their hands tied behind their backs when reporting about this “self-governing island,” due to increasing threats to press freedom from Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平).

Taiwan has been listed as a free country by the US-based non-governmental organization Freedom House for 20 consecutive years, with a perfect score of one out of seven — one being most free — for the past two years. In the last report, Hong Kong was classified as “partly free,” while China was designated as “not free.”

In last year’s World Press Freedom Index report published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Taiwan was given a ranking of three out of seven, where one represents most free and seven the least free. Hong Kong was given a ranking of four, China seven.

The RSF Web site writes of the decline of media freedoms in other Asian nations and calls China a “press freedom predator,” adding that the main threat to media freedom in Taiwan comes from China, which has been “exerting growing economic and political pressure on the Taiwanese media.”

If Beijing ever gets to annex Taiwan, you can say goodbye to the press freedoms celebrated in the New York Times’ article.

To the third point, it is a curious thing that very few — if any — Western media outlets use language in their reports about Taiwan that coheres with the perception held by the majority of

Taiwanese that their country is an independent, autonomous sovereign nation.

Taiwan is described in the international press as “self-governed Taiwan,” “the self-governing island” or sometimes simply “the island.” It has also been called “Taiwan, a holdout for anti-communist forces after China’s civil war ended in 1949.” Alternatively, the language is tempered in phrases such as “the US treats Taiwan as a sovereign nation,” as if it is not such a thing at all.

Meanwhile, China is often referred to as “the mainland” or “mainland China,” rather than just China.

All of this has an effect on how Taiwan is perceived within the international community and pressure from China is of course behind this phenomenon.

The International Federation of Journalists in February launched its China Press Freedom Report for last year, entitled Ten-Year Edition: A Decade of Decline. The report talks of the “seemingly never-ending onslaught of restrictive orders and controls on movement, as well as threats and intimidation by way of job losses, blocking of accreditation and rejection of visas in the case of foreign journalists” in China.

In 2014, a Reuters report talked of how restrictions on media freedom for foreign reporters in China was attracting high-level concern in the US, “especially over worries that the government is denying visas for organizations that carry negative stories about China.”

At the time, China refused to renew the visa for Beijing-based New York Times journalist Austin Ramzy, citing a technical issue with the application. Another interpretation at the time was that it was revenge for the publication in 2012 of an expose of the wealth amassed by family members of the then-Chinese premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝).

Ramzy is now the New York Times’ Hong Kong correspondent. He was one of the authors of the article mentioned earlier.

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