

Carrying on the fight

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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With many in Taiwan and elsewhere focused on digesting the results of the elections and referendums held a week ago today, an award ceremony in Sweden on Tuesday passed almost unnoticed and unremarked.

Li Wenzu (李 Wenzu), the wife of Chinese rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang (王 Quanzhang) who was detained as part of the “709 crackdown” in 2015, was awarded the fourth Edelstam Prize for exceptional courage in standing up in defense of human rights.

The prize is awarded in the name of Swedish diplomat Harald Edelstam, who gained renown in Latin America for his dogged efforts to protect and save Chileans, Uruguayans, Swedes and hundreds of others detained or sought by the junta that overthrew the government of then-Chilean president Miguel Allende in September 1973 in the weeks after the coup, until he was declared persona non grata by the Santiago government.

Li and Wang Qiaoling (王 Qiaoling), the wife of another rights lawyer, Li Heping (李 Heping), began what has become known as the “709 Family,” formed to assist the families of the 300 lawyers, paralegals and others rounded up by the Chinese government for their efforts to promote a civil society and defend dissidents, and to campaign for the detainees’ release.

Wang Quanzhang remains in detention awaiting trial and Chinese authorities continue to bar his lawyers or family from seeing him, while Li Wenzu, like so many others in her position, has faced arrest and harassment.

Since Li Wenzu is barred from leaving China, her award was collected by Yuan Weijing (袁 Weijing), the wife of exiled lawyer Chen Guangcheng (陈 Guangcheng) and someone who faced similar battles when her husband was arrested.

Li Wenzu, Wang Qiaoling and others in the 709 Family are following a well-trodden path laid out in China by the Tiananmen Mothers — formed in September 1989 by family members of those killed in the Tiananmen Square Massacre and survivors — and elsewhere by people such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, formed in April 1977, who battle repressive regimes and demand accountability for the disappearance, torture, imprisonment

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and killing of those considered enemies by such governments.

Taiwan also has a long line of such women, wives who took on the former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) authoritarian government in the Martial Law era and afterward to defend their husbands, families and others when their spouses were imprisoned or dead, such as Fang Su-min (方素敏), Wu Shu-jen (吳淑貞) and Yeh Chu-lan (葉菊蘭), often at great cost to themselves — two of Fang's daughters and her mother-in-law were murdered, Wu was paralyzed after being deliberately run over.

Lee Ching-yu (李慶元) was added to the ranks last year when her husband, rights advocate Lee Ming-che (李明哲), was detained by Chinese authorities and later convicted of “subversion of state power” — largely for work and videos that he did in Taiwan.

Lee Ching-yu has testified before the US House of Representatives, the British parliament and a German parliamentary committee and elsewhere in her efforts to draw attention to her husband's case and other human rights abuses by the Chinese government. For the past two months she has been denied the right to visit her husband, amid reports that Chinese authorities have shuttled him between prisons.

Li Wenzu, Lee Ching-yu and so many others like them — be they in Taiwan, China or elsewhere — deserve our support and appreciation, as the battles they face might stem from personal ties, but they are really fighting for all of us.

Those who are eager to pursue closer economic and political ties with Beijing in the wake of last week's elections should take a moment to consider the sacrifices and ordeals of these women and others campaigning for accountability, the rule of law and human rights in China — and the incarceration of Lee Ming-che.

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