

The government might consider a plan to convert the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall into a space that honors all former presidents, Minister Without Portfolio Lin Wan-i (林萬益) said on Wednesday. Former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮) had made the suggestion on Tuesday, but Lin said that no decision would be made on what to do with the hall any time soon.

The implementation of the Act on Promoting Transitional Justice (促進轉型正義法), which aims to remove authoritarian-era symbols and address miscarriages of justice from that era, has proved socially divisive since the law was passed by the Legislative Yuan on Dec. 5, 2017.

The Transitional Justice Commission in October last year said that there are more than 1,000 statues of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) throughout the country at schools, parks and other public sites, and that removing or relocating them is a crucial step toward achieving transitional justice.

The commission has often compared transitional justice in Taiwan to efforts in Germany first to eliminate symbols of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) and Adolf Hitler, and later to handle assets illicitly obtained by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) — which governed East Germany until reunification in 1990. The commission has invited transitional justice officials from Germany to speak in Taiwan and to share their advice.

However, Taiwan's experience is fundamentally different from Germany's in a few important ways. Unlike the SED or the Nazi Party, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) is not only still active, but is one of the nation's two dominant political parties. The results of the local elections on Nov. 24 last year show that the KMT enjoys significant democratic support.

Arguably, Chiang is one of the symbols of the KMT, which is evident from many party members' and supporters' objections to the removal of his statues. Also, the KMT was the founding party of the nation as it is defined in the Constitution.

In Germany there might be overwhelming majority support for the removal of Nazi symbolism and the redistribution of SED assets, but the same strategies are not as easily applied to the KMT, its assets and its former leaders, given the support that it enjoys. The German

Symbols' removal needs consensus

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experience also differs in that Germans were physically divided, whereas Taiwanese are only politically divided. East Germans largely longed for democracy through unification, but KMT supporters freely choose to democratically elect the party into power.

Ill-gotten party assets absolutely should be handled according to the law, and injustices such as political persecution must be rectified, but symbolism is tied to national identity, which makes it a much thornier issue in Taiwan than it was in Germany after World War II and again after reunification.

Arguably there is also a more pressing case for the elimination of Nazi symbolism in Germany, because that regime was rooted in a perverted nationalism that sought to eliminate groups of people based on a theory of racial superiority. The pinnacle of that hatred was the Holocaust, which resulted in the deaths of 17 million Jewish people, gay men, Roma, “incurably sick” people and others.

While statues of Chiang are a source of anguish for victims of political persecution, and while they are out of place in democratic Taiwan, it is highly inconceivable that they would serve to incite a renewed crackdown on political dissidents.

Removing Chiang statues requires a majority consensus on national identity and national values. If the KMT loses support, or if the KMT and its supporters resolve to distance themselves from the party's past leadership, then it would make sense to remove the statues — especially the largest one at the memorial hall. That would also be a great time to revisit the Constitution.

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