

Taiwan's democratization has often been touted as a model for other countries. While the compliment is uplifting and fitting recognition of the blood, sweat and tears shed by local democracy pioneers, there is more that Taiwan should and could do than being a mere example. Rather than passively standing tall for others to look up to as a model of democracy, Taiwan should take the initiative and offer a helping hand to those who still struggle for freedom and face grave human rights violations, particularly at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party.

It is encouraging that for the first time since President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the 2016 election, a party official has publicly invited the Dalai Lama to visit Taiwan. During a march on Sunday in Taipei on the 60th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, DPP Secretary-General Luo Wen-jia (羅文嘉) said: "We welcome the Dalai Lama making a trip to Taiwan. He should have the freedom and the right to go wherever he wants — even to his homeland."

Hopefully, the DPP is not paying mere lip service and setting the Tibetan community and supporters of Tibet up for disappointment as happened under then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). Taipei "always welcomes the Dalai Lama's visit," Ma said in 2001 as Taipei mayor, but when he became president in 2008, his administration turned down several visa requests from the Dalai Lama, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying that he could visit Taiwan, but the government needed to arrange "a more opportune time."

The Dalai Lama last visited Taiwan in September 2009, after Ma's government reluctantly gave him a visa so he could perform religious rituals and console survivors of Typhoon Morakot, which had devastated the south one month earlier, killing at least 700 people. Ma refused to meet with the Dalai Lama, with authorities saying that the visit was purely for religious purposes. However, public perception had it that Ma was kowtowing to Beijing.

During the Dalai Lama's previous two visits to Taiwan in March 1997 and March 2001, then-presidents Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) met with him and treated him as a visiting head of state.

Dawa Tsering, chairman of the Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama,

which represents the Tibetan government-in-exile in Taiwan, has said that the Dalai Lama has expressed a desire to visit Taiwan, but has not made a formal decision, as he does not want to cause trouble for the government.

While the Dalai Lama is showing himself to be considerate, Taiwan should not sit idly by, but be proactive. Why should the government wait for the Dalai Lama to tender a formal request or a signature drive launched by civic organizations to be completed? The DPP must not repeat the mistakes of the KMT.

Over the past year, self-immolation protests continued to take place in Tibet, with reports from international human rights groups showing continuous abuses against Tibetans by the Chinese authorities. Taiwan, having experienced the pain experienced by Tibetans, more than any other country ought to demonstrate empathy for Tibetans and others who are still struggling, and take it upon itself to assist democratization in other nations.

“Taiwan knows how it feels when someone tries to take away your rights, wipe out your identity and challenge your way of life,” Tsai told the Civil Society Dialogue on Securing Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific Region forum in Taipei yesterday. “Therefore, Taiwan chooses to stand with those who were oppressed and whose religious rights were taken away by authoritarian regimes.”

Tsai is right. Hopefully, the nation’s leaders can act on her promises.

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