

Continuing challenge to democracy

Written by Jerome Keating
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After decade upon decade of struggle to overcome the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) one-party state, martial law and the White Terror era, Taiwanese finally won the right to freely elect their own government. They won democracy.

From 1996 on, they could not only elect members of the Legislative Yuan, but also the nation's president. This put the future of Taiwan squarely in the hands of the voters.

Yet after all those struggles and all those years, many of the nation's beneficiaries now fail to recognize the responsibility that accompanies that right to vote and even appear to give it away.

Such responsibility is at the heart and soul of any democracy. The gist of it is summed up in the inscription at the entrance to the US National Archives: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

Democratic vigilance faces many dangers. Democracy is not something that once won is never lost. Threats to it are found everywhere, even in the free speech that it allows.

One such danger is the complacent security that a free-speech atmosphere provides citizens. Too easily they come to tolerate a variety of absurdities and non sequiturs, and as a result, they lose track of the purpose of past struggles, namely to win that democratic birthright.

Citizens start to ask non sequiturs such as: If we are democratic, why are we not rich? They then equate winning democracy with deserved success in a changing world economy and forget that these are separate playing fields.

Such forgetfulness is not just Taiwan's problem. Examine the UK: When its democracy was threatened with extinction in World War II, it called upon its many "colonials" for help and sacrifice in that epic struggle.

Yet an epic irony followed. That nation, which had no qualms about colonizing the world for growth and profit, now expresses a fear of immigrants and seeks isolation with its Brexit. In short, the colonizer of the world is rejecting the words of its famous metaphysical poet John Donne, who said: “No man is an island.”

The US faces a similar issue. It is a nation built by immigrants and whose Statue of Liberty has a plaque that bears the lines from an Emma Lazarus sonnet: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Ironically, that nation of immigrants now wishes to put its most new “yearning to breathe free” arrivals in concentration camps. It follows a braggadocio president known more for the reality of his bankruptcies than boasted “successful deals.” He plays to their fears, telling them that to be “great again,” they must close their borders and limit immigrants to a trickle of the more wealthy variety.

Taiwan’s newly won democracy faces its own challenges. It appears to be following the Biblical Esau, who too easily sold his birthright for a “mess of pottage.” Offering promises of bangles, beads and wealth, some political candidates suggest selling Taiwan’s democratic birthright for an attractive mess of pottage in China.

With a short memory span, many voters ignore the past struggles for democracy and hasten to follow those who promise riches.

Among their pied pipers is Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜). With little experience and no actual plans, he nonetheless successfully draws constituents with promises of great wealth and prosperity by winging it.

Like those in the UK and the US, many Taiwanese voters find themselves susceptible to easy promises and forget their nation’s battles for democracy and those who paid the price of victory.

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Across the Taiwan Strait, of course, the one-party state People's Republic of China continues to dangle a mess of pottage. It is the same nation that broke its promise with Hong Kong, the same nation that imprisons millions of Uighurs to "re-educate" them and the same nation that is destroying Tibetan culture in the name of its one-party state. Only Mongolia escaped that pottage and it did so because it had the strong backing of the then-Soviet Union, which sought a buffer between it and China.

Now, there is nothing wrong with a nation and its citizens seeking a strong economy. However, the ultimate question that all must ask is what price is demanded for that economy's mess of pottage.

For Taiwan, it is this: Did those who died do so for the fantasy that is being promised today? Did they die to be part of a false motherland? Did they die because some fearful citizens cried that China is too big a one-party state to oppose?

Taiwanese can go down the list of the many who suffered and died. They can ask the souls of those who died on Green Island (綠島) or those who lost the prime of their lives in prisons all over Taiwan. They can examine the many who participated in the dangwai (黨外, "outside the party") movement, the Wild Lilies and even the Sunflowers. They can ask: Why did these people make their sacrifices?

This is what Taiwanese must put to their politicians at campaign events. Where do they stand on the independence of Taiwan's hard-won democracy? Is it up for sale with the mess of pottage?

From this it follows that Taiwanese must constantly examine the ever-present irony: Why did the KMT stop opposing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) only after it no longer had its one-party state and began to lose elections? What made KMT members begin to fall all over one another in the rush to court the CCP one-party state?

Taiwanese can also ask: Did any of those in the New Party, the People's First Party, the KMT, etc, ever have a Taiwanese identity? They might have paid a price, but it was not a price for Taiwan's democracy.

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A dead giveaway is found in those who recommend the bogus “1992 consensus” invented in 2000 by then-Mainland Affairs Council chairman Su Chi (蘇起) when the KMT first lost the presidency. When someone supports the “consensus,” Taiwanese can know that they have a democratic traitor in their midst. These traitors have already sold out Taiwan’s democracy for power and a mess of “one China” pottage.

In opposition, the bottom line for all those who endured the White Terror era and martial law is that they did not do it for a mess of pottage. Their ghosts would turn in shame at some of the promises they now hear made by those seeking office.

Thus, with the elections soon to heat up, Taiwanese must review what their democracy is about. It requires eternal vigilance and a clear memory. The democratic right to vote was Taiwan’s non-negotiable bottom line in the past. Is it the same now?

Any politician who feels differently should be sent packing to the other side of the Strait.

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