

The Formosa Incident: a look back

Written by Gerrit Van Der Wees
Tuesday, 10 December 2019 06:50

This week, Taiwan is remembering that 40 years ago, on Dec. 10, 1979, the Formosa Incident, also known as the Kaohsiung Incident, took place.

Most people are familiar with what happened: Democracy leaders associated with Formosa Magazine organized a Human Rights Day rally in Kaohsiung. The event resulted in chaos when police surrounded the crowd and started to use tear gas.

Taiwan was still under martial law, which began in 1949, and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime arrested virtually all opposition leaders, charging them with “sedition” and “attempting to overthrow the government.”

The rest is history: The relatives of the imprisoned opposition leaders and the lawyers who defended them formed the vanguard of the subsequent dangwai (黨外, “outside the party”) democracy movement.

The movement sprouted a number of dangwai magazines, which quickly became popular, and were therefore banned and confiscated by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) authorities. From 1981 through 1985 an increasingly intense tug-of-war played out between the police and these dangwai magazines, which used a series of innovative moves — such as “spare-tire” titles — to keep publishing and getting the uncensored version of the news to the public.

In 1986, a young half-mainlander activist, Deng Nan-jung (鄧南雄), added a new dynamic to the equation. With his publication Freedom Era Weekly, he started the “Green Ribbon Campaign”: increasingly large street demonstrations for freedom and democracy, and for the end of martial law.

The present street demonstrations in Hong Kong are reminiscent of those in Taipei in 1986.

In addition to pressure from the grassroots level, Taiwan’s democracy movement of the 1980s had important support from abroad: In the US and Europe, the overseas Taiwanese community

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coalesced after the Kaohsiung Incident through organizations such as the Formosan Association for Public Affairs (FAPA). They were effective in getting members of US Congress and European parliaments to speak out for human rights and democracy.

In the US Congress in particular, then-US senators Ted Kennedy and Claiborne Pell, and then-US representatives Stephen Solarz and Jim Leach — known as the “Gang of Four” — were outspoken in their support of human rights and democracy, and critical of the imprisonment of the democracy leaders and of the continued existence of martial law.

What is less well-known is that then-president Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) was eventually pressured into ending martial law on July 14, 1987, and the nation transitioned to democracy under the presidency of Lee Teng-hui (李登輝).

Thus, in retrospect, the Kaohsiung Incident laid the foundation for this momentous transition. Taiwanese can be thankful that it was a relatively peaceful change.

At the same time, those who made the ultimate sacrifice must be remembered: Lin I-hsiung (林義雄), whose mother and twin daughters were murdered in their home in broad daylight on Feb. 28, 1980, while their house was under strict police surveillance; Carnegie Mellon University assistant professor Chen Wen-chen (陳文成), who was found dead at National Taiwan University on July 3, 1981, after having been “interviewed” by the Taiwan Garrison Command; Deng, who set himself on fire rather than being arrested by police storming into his office on April 7, 1989; and Dr Wang Kang-lu (王康), a leading Taiwanese-American independence activist who died in a mysterious “car accident” in Taipei on Oct. 12, 1993.

In addition to laying the foundation for Taiwan’s democracy, the Kaohsiung Incident and its aftermath also played an important role in cementing international support for Taiwan and its vibrant democracy. It showed the world that Taiwanese were willing and able to build a stable, multi-party democratic system.

This new and democratic Taiwan is now a beacon of hope in East Asia, in particular for the people of Hong Kong who are fighting so courageously for their own democracy. Taiwan is a mirror for them, showing what can be achieved if they persist.

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On a personal note: The Kaohsiung Incident also represents a turning point in my life, as it marked the beginning of a life-long quest in support of Taiwan's democracy and acceptance by the international community as a full and equal member. In the process, my wife and I published our Taiwan Communique (www.taiwandc.org/twcom/) for 35 years.

Gerrit van der Wees is a former Dutch diplomat. From 1980 through 2016 he served as chief editor of Taiwan Communique, a publication dedicated to human rights and democracy in Taiwan.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2019/12/010](#)