

Today the nation pauses to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the 228 Incident, a brutal crackdown by the then-Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime against Taiwanese protesters following an incident in Taipei on Feb. 27, 1947.

Nobody knows how many lives were destroyed in the ensuing massacre that lasted into early May 1947, but estimates range from 18,000 to 28,000, many of whom were members of Taiwan's intellectual elite. The event marked the beginning of the White Terror era, which saw many more thousands of people arrested, imprisoned or executed.

Despite the passing of time, the 228 Massacre and the White Terror still cast a long shadow over Taiwanese society. Although a program of transitional justice to right the wrongs of the past had been discussed for a long time, it only became viable when the Democratic Progressive Party returned to power in 2016.

The independent Transitional Justice Commission, established by President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration on May 31, 2018, has since engaged in the painstaking task of piecing together the actions of the KMT regime between Aug. 15, 1945, and Nov. 6, 1992, to build as complete a picture as possible of crimes carried out by the state.

On Wednesday, the commission achieved a new milestone with the launch of the Taiwan Transitional Justice Database, a searchable online collection of records and photographs of victims of political persecution during the White Terror era, as well as the names and ranks of perpetrators.

While this was an important achievement, perhaps there has been too much focus on unearthing the truth and too little on the other equally important aspect of transitional justice: reconciliation.

Without truth and justice there can be no reconciliation, but without the prospect of forgiveness, the full truth will likely never see the light of day. This is the uncomfortable reality that Taiwanese society must accept if the process is to move forward. Thankfully, there are precedents to follow, such as South Africa's implementation of transitional justice through its

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Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Established at the end of apartheid, witnesses and victims were invited to give statements to the TRC about their experiences, some of which were selected for public hearings. Crucially, the alleged perpetrators of violence were also given the opportunity to testify and request amnesty from prosecution.

The TRC's emphasis on reconciliation and restorative justice allowed the truth to be brought out into the open, as perpetrators felt confident that they would get a fair hearing.

While the government has studied the South African process, somehow the reconciliation aspect was lost. The way Taiwan's commission operates is in many ways more similar to the retributive justice of the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

It is time that Taiwanese ask what is the price of uncovering the truth and what achieving justice means. Is a public airing of the truth a form of justice in and of itself, or does justice require nothing short of civil or criminal prosecution?

The time is now ripe to incorporate reconciliation into Taiwan's transitional justice process. While the administration of former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) was too reactionary — and Taiwan's democracy too fragile at the time — with a term in office already under its belt, the Tsai administration has proved itself to be a prudent and responsible government that would be perfectly capable of handling a full truth and reconciliation process in a fair and transparent manner.

The government should consider providing a guarantee of legal immunity to surviving perpetrators. This could help unblock logjams — particularly in the intelligence services, police and military — over the declassification of files relating to the 228 Incident and the White Terror era, and help dispel concerns within the KMT over the opening up of its party archives.

Without a true process of truth and reconciliation, Taiwan will never be able to put the past behind it and unite as one people.

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