

Democracy dies in darkness

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Friday, 04 June 2021 04:32

For the second consecutive year, Hong Kongers have been prohibited from holding a candlelit vigil in Victoria Park this evening on the grounds of COVID-19 “health concerns.” Held annually, the vigil remembers victims of the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square Massacre, when peaceful democracy protesters were peppered with bullets and mowed down by armored personnel carriers in Beijing.

Prior to last year’s ban — also ostensibly due to COVID-19 safety concerns — Hong Kongers had held the vigil for three decades without interruption. Although some ignored last year’s ban and converged on Victoria Park, attendance was significantly lower than in previous years. Today’s commemorations are expected to be even more rigorously policed.

During the past few days, Hong Kong media have been reporting that more than 1,000 riot police would be deployed in and around Victoria Park to turn people away, while police presence across the territory would be beefed up. There are also reports that anyone who wears black clothing — the default color of Hong Kong’s democracy movement — or who holds a candle while outside, could run the risk of being arrested and charged for unauthorized assembly, and face a five-year custodial sentence.

Hong Kong’s puppet government has also emulated the cowardly practice of dictatorships the world over, cooking up a wafer-thin excuse to force a museum that commemorates the massacre to close down on the eve of the anniversary. The Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department initiated legal proceedings against the June 4th Museum on Tuesday for operating “without a license for places of public entertainment.”

Memo to Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥): People do not visit a museum about a massacre for “entertainment.”

It might be that Hong Kongers, ever-resourceful, would find new ways to circumvent the restrictions and commemorate today’s anniversary, but however creative their actions, it would not be the same. The visual power of tens of thousands of candles illuminating the darkness of mainland China cannot be easily replicated through online memes or cloak-and-dagger gestures. Sadly, Hong Kong’s candlelit vigil will probably never happen again.

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Who will keep the fires burning to remember the victims of the massacre that the Chinese Communist Party has, with its typical ruthless efficiency, comprehensively thrust down the memory hole? With the final flickering flames of freedom on the verge of being snuffed out in Hong Kong, Taiwan has become the the Chinese-speaking world's last bastion of freedom.

It must be acknowledged that the connection to the massacre and empathy for its victims is certainly weaker here than in Hong Kong. Taiwan does hold annual commemorative events, yet they are typically on a much smaller scale. This is, to some extent, understandable. Taiwan was still negotiating the path toward democracy when the massacre took place, and mass protests were still a sensitive issue; consequently, knowledge about the massacre is not as deeply ingrained as it is in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has also historically acted as a shelter for Chinese political refugees in a way that was not possible for the more geographically distant Taiwan. Additionally, many Taiwanese, especially benshengren (本省人, people who came to Taiwan before World War II) feel disconnected from modern Chinese history and identify as Taiwanese, not Chinese.

Nevertheless, as the lights go out in Hong Kong, Taiwan must carry the torch for the victims of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and help illuminate the plight of Hong Kongers, too. If Taiwanese wish to be fully accepted and respected by the international community, it is incumbent upon them to fully engage with the outside world and shine a light on atrocities, wherever they occur, for democracy dies in darkness.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2021/06/04](#)