

Freedom House cites sovereignty woes

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A report released by US rights watchdog Freedom House on Monday said that although many Taiwanese are in favor of improving economic and trade ties with China, critics believe the government has made concessions on sovereignty, that cross-strait policies have developed too quickly and that the process lacks transparency.

On Jan. 12, the Washington-based Freedom House released the political rights and civil liberties scores for its *Freedom in the World 2010* survey. Taiwan's political rights rating improved from 2 to 1, but its civil liberties rating dropped from 1 to 2.

The full version of *Freedom in the World 2010* released this week includes individual country reports.

On Taiwan, the survey pointed to a number of worrying developments, including Taiwan's refusal last year to grant a visa to Uighur dissident Rebiya Kadeer, Beijing's continued hard-line position on the question of Taiwanese independence and the fact that China has more than 1,300 missiles aimed at Taiwan.

These factors have led some Taiwanese to fear that increasing economic and diplomatic dependence on China would put Taiwan in a straitjacket on issues that Beijing regards as sensitive.

Last year, Taiwan ratified two important UN conventions — the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights — but in June last year, the UN declined to validate Taiwan's ratification.

This was a reminder that the UN recognizes the People's Republic of China as the sole representative of China, including Taiwan, the report said.

In its assessment of media freedom in Taiwan, *Freedom in the World 2010* identified placement of information by the government as a major problem.

It also raised concerns about political interference in personnel changes in some state-owned media, such as the appointment of a government spokesperson as vice president of Central News Agency (CNA) soon after President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) came into office in 2008.

CNA employees, the report said, received instructions to alter the content of some reports to dilute criticism of the government.

The survey said that following the 2008 purchase of a majority stake in the China Times Group by Want Want chairman Tsai Eng-meng (蔡英孟), a businessman with commercial interests in China, a number of developments occurred that give cause for concern.

The editorial board came under pressure to tone down criticism of the Ma administration and of Beijing.

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Also, in June last year, the China Times Group threatened to sue reporters and freedom of the press advocates after they criticized the group during its conflict with the National Communications Commission.

Last year, legislation requiring government approval of Public Television Service programming was dropped after public protests, the report says.

However, local press freedom advocates and the Control Yuan criticized subsequent government measures to expand the service's board and replace its management.

There are generally no restrictions on the Internet, which was accessed by more than 65 percent of the population last year, it said.

Although Taiwanese educators can generally write and lecture freely, Freedom House said, the ability of academics to engage in political activism outside the classroom came under pressure last year.

In July last year, the legislature passed the Act Governing the -Administrative Impartiality of Public Officials (行政中立法), which contained provisions restraining academics at public schools from participating in certain political activities.

In addition, two teachers known for their involvement in human rights groups faced prosecution for organizing peaceful protests surrounding the 2008 visit of a Chinese envoy, the report said.

Meanwhile, China's status in this year's survey was reported as "not free."

The survey says repression in China worsened last year.

Even though the Chinese government has sought to combat corruption, the problem remains rampant, the report said, adding that this has led to growing popular resentment.

The problem is especially serious in businesses that have heavy state involvement, such as construction, land purchases and banking, the survey says.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) spokesperson Tsai Chi-chang (蔡啟芳) said the problems highlighted by Freedom House were accurate representations of many concerns that it has already raised.

"These problems are common concerns for the public and we believe the government should focus more on resolving them," he said.

He said matters such as the possible impact on Taiwan's sovereignty of changes in cross-strait ties covered by the report were problems that have been "conveniently forgotten" by the Ma administration.

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“They talk about what they want to talk about, but they have been unwilling to face up to the truth,” he said in reference to the cross-strait relationship.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Lo Shu-lei (鄧錫德) disagreed with the report’s conclusions, calling the criticism “unfair.”

“The relations between Taiwan and China are special,” she said. “The ECFA [Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement with China] is an economic issue. Why do you need to turn it into a political one?”

On the report’s findings regarding freedom of the press, Lo said the government should refrain from interfering in personnel reshuffles in the media.

Also reacting to the report, Government Information Office (GIO) Minister Johnny Chiang (蔣經國) skirted the sovereignty issue and focused on freedom of speech.

That Taiwan was ranked a “free” nation for 10 consecutive years demonstrated the government’s determination and continuous efforts to improve the human rights situation, maintain democracy and rule of law, and ensure freedom of speech, he said.

Chiang rebutted criticism that the government was subsidizing media outlets to advertise its policies and achievements through coverage, saying the GIO did not blur the lines between media coverage and advertisements in its public relations efforts.

On Freedom House’s comments regarding CNA, Chiang said the office “fully respected” the news agency’s independence.

Chiang said the government would review and discuss the findings and make the necessary improvements to ensure a better ranking next year.

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