

The time of pleasing China is over

Written by Liberty Times Editorial
Tuesday, 05 December 2017 06:42 -

On Tuesday LAST week the Yueyang City Intermediate People's Court in China's Hunan Province sentenced Taiwanese human rights activist Lee Ming-che (李明哲) to five years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power."

Lee told Chinese media that he confessed to and regretted the offense, would not appeal the verdict and accepted the prison sentence.

The case highlights the increasing danger to Taiwanese traveling in China and comes at a time when Beijing is also tightening its autocratic rule domestically, a clampdown that is not directed merely at political ideas.

The Beijing authorities have used concerns over potential fire hazards as an excuse to tear down more than 10,000 illegally built homes and drive out tens of thousands of "low-end" people — disadvantaged people with low incomes, often temporary workers from other parts of China — in the cold of winter.

One Chinese Communist Party (CCP) district secretary issued orders to the demolition squads to be tough and ruthless, and said that they should tear down whatever they could today and not wait until tomorrow.

Following Beijing's removal of its "low-end" population, Ningbo also launched a "great investigation and regulation" drive focused mainly on the subletting of housing, and Guangzhou also announced that it would regulate sublets.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the next political slogan in China will be: "Everyone is responsible for the elimination of the 'low-end' population."

Low-income temporary workers in big cities are unable to stand up to state violence and have no choice but to accept being pushed around, but they are the only ones being pushed around. Just like Taiwan has Lee and his wife, Lee Ching-yu (李登輝), China has Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) and his

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wife, Liu Xia (刘霞).

In 2008, following the publication of Charter 08, Liu Xiaobo was also arrested on charges of subverting state power, only to be convicted the following year.

Liu, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, was unable to attend the award ceremony and was kept locked up until his death earlier this year. Not even his ashes were released. Liu Xia still has not regained her freedom.

Liu Xiaobo and Liu Xia in China, and Lee Ming-che and Lee Ching-yu in Taiwan had different backgrounds, but they were all on the receiving end of the same state violence, which is clear evidence of the dangers in contemporary China.

Today, this danger is focused on the elimination of “low-end” people, but who will be targeted tomorrow? The power struggle within the top leadership has begun and it is just a matter of time before it spreads to society at large and the economy.

The world in general, and the Taiwanese government and public in particular, must understand that there has been a qualitative change in China over the past five years.

Despite what some people think, this change does not mean that the CCP has left communism behind or that it is a “new” communist party. Instead it means that the “soft” authoritarianism of former Chinese presidents Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) has given way to a return to the “hard” dictatorship of the Mao Zedong (毛泽东) era.

Soft authoritarianism was not the result of political reform, but rather of those in power in the wake of China’s economic growth using their power to enrich themselves, and these considerable economic interests weakened political discipline.

The “hard” dictatorship is the result of a power struggle disguised as an anti-corruption drive

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aimed at destroying the collective political and economic leadership — based on shared power and economic interests — and a move toward individual dictatorship and a long-term hold on power.

This “hard” dictatorship is taking state power to new extremes domestically, while walking roughshod over universal values in the international arena.

Furthermore, the reliance on markets and factories, a stronger military and “great power” diplomacy introduces new variables and challenges to global peace.

For Taiwan, which finds itself geographically close to this “hard” dictatorship, the Lee Ming-che case provides a focal point, and how to move forward and safeguard Taiwan is becoming a very real challenge.

Prior to this, Beijing responded to the struggle in Hong Kong for universal suffrage and the “Umbrella movement” by taking complete control of the territory. After this backlash to calls for democracy and international concerns, the spirit of the “hard” dictatorship now looms over Hong Kong.

Following the CCP’s 19th National Congress, Chinese military aircraft and ships have circled Taiwan, moving through the Miyako Strait, the Bashi Channel and the waters east of Taiwan. This is a new strategy in China’s conflict with Taiwan and a projection of force aimed at blocking US assistance.

Xi’s so-called “six anys” — China will not permit any person, any organization or any political party at any time, using any means to tear any part of Chinese territory away from the country — in combination with strategies aimed at the younger generation — treating Taiwanese as citizens, hiring Taiwanese teachers and attracting Taiwanese students and young Taiwanese workers — are putting even greater pressure on Taiwan’s national symbols and the status of our government, while at the same time continuing the “united front” strategy aimed at industry and businesses on the one hand and civic society on the other.

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President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration keeps waiting for a show of goodwill from the Chinese side, but it must no longer continue its passive and defensive approach if it wants to avoid being bypassed as Taiwan is economically ruined and diplomatically isolated while the government loses power and the social foundation for Taiwanese independence is undermined.

After Lee Ming-che's sentencing, some people said that it is a signal that more nefarious measures will be taken against Taiwan, and relief organizations have said that the Tsai administration is too weak.

Other countries coming under pressure from China to send Taiwanese fraud suspects to China was an early warning sign that Beijing is trying to create the impression that China has de facto control over Taiwan.

In the Lee Ming-che case, there are few practical measures that the Tsai administration could take and domestic criticism is to be expected. The question is whether the nation can deal with the change from goodwill to cold-heartedness that has taken place over the past year.

Beijing has made it clear that it will behave like a "hard" dictatorship when it comes to cross-strait relations and that there will be no talks without recognition of "one China."

Tsai's government is shooting itself in the foot by continuing to insist on showing goodwill toward China when it holds no bargaining chips.

Tsai has a wealth of negotiating experience and she should know that to achieve a breakthrough, she needs to have a bargaining chip or two up her sleeve and she cannot put herself in a difficult situation from which there is no way out.

This was true in the Lee Ming-che case and it is just as true if the nation is to give up its passive approach and take initiative.

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