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State of Siege

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The past few days in Taiwan have been marked by a mixture of joy and trepidation: joy at Obama’s unprecedented electoral triumph and what it means for the achievement of justice and racial harmony (dare we hope that one day a Hakka or Aborigine may become President of Taiwan?), but also trepidation over the state of Taiwan’s democratic system. Violent street protests accompanying the visit of Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) Chairman Chen Yunlin 陳雲林 have shocked and dismayed the nation, prompting the normally mild-mannered President Ma Ying-jieou 馬英九 to pound the podium in rage while issuing a strong rebuke to those involved.

There is ample blame to go around for both the government and opposition, and especially for those opportunistic DPP politicians and other public figures who attempted to use the protests against Chen’s visit to gain greater notoriety and/or enhance their prospects for winning future elections. At the same time, however, simply labeling the protests as the work of some sort of violent rabble overlooks the fact that many participants were law-abiding citizens deeply concerned about their country’s future. To keep things in perspective, the pattern of largely peaceful protests dissolving into violence following the infiltration of gangsters and other anti-social elements also occurred following the Presidential Election of 2004 and the Depose Bian (倒扁) movement of 2006, the main difference being that the leaders of these protests were mostly members of the pan-blue camp or their sympathizers.

It is also essential to recognize that protests during the first two days of Chen’s visit were largely peaceful. Many people agree with the need for enhanced contacts and mutual understanding across the Taiwan Strait, and the agreements signed during Chen’s visit should benefit the citizens of China and Taiwan alike while aiding the cause of regional stability. Lengthy negotiations led to the signing of deals to introduce direct cargo shipping between 11 Taiwanese seaports and 63 in China, expand direct postal links, increase passenger flights from 36 to 108 while also allowing private business jet flights, shorten existing routes across the Taiwan Strait, and allow more mainland tourists to visit Taiwan. In the wake of the melamine scandals, closer cooperation was also promised on food safety issues, and both countries agreed to a wildlife swap, with China receiving a deer and a Formosa serow (an indigenous goat-like animal) in exchange for two pandas with names that when combined (團園 and 員員) symbolize a reunion.

There was also the symbolic importance of the meeting between Ma and Chen, which represented the highest level of contact between the two sides since 1949. Despite the fact that the meeting was moved forward five hours to avoid protestors and lasted a mere 5-7 minutes, with Chen declining to address Ma as “President”, the fact that such a high-level encounter took place at all provides hope for the future.

Nonetheless, many people were dismayed by the mammoth security operation that accompanied Chen’s visit. A cordon sanitaire was set up around all the sites that Chen visited, and attempts at peaceful protest inside the cordon were met with swift and decisive action. National flags were confiscated or their holders hustled away (see video), while people wearing “Taiwan is my country” T-shirts were stopped, questioned, and in some cases also ordered to leave. Perhaps the most disturbing scene occurred outside a music store located near one of the hotels where Chen was enjoying a banquet with some businessmen and KMT bigwigs. Videos of the incident (originally broadcast on the 東森 and 中天 networks) show people dancing in the streets to the sounds of the “Song of Taiwan”, with the atmosphere being almost carnival-like...until a group of uniformed and plain-clothed policemen entered the store, instructed the owner to shut off its sound system, and attempted to close its doors. Apparently someone had filed a noise complaint, but loudness is a daily fact of life here and it is rare for the police to respond with such vigor.

The tone of the protests turned decidedly negative following that particular incident, which, along with the numerous state attempts to curtail peaceful expressions of free speech, prompted over 200 students to stage a sit-in outside the Executive Yuan to protest what they perceived to be excessive
use of force by the police. After being hauled away by the police (videos can be found on TVBS and 華視), the students moved the protest to Liberty Plaza (自由廣場). The KMT has responded by pointing out that the sit-in was illegal, but it should also be noted that under current Taiwan law the police have the power to approve or reject applications for public demonstrations, as well as arrest those who subsequently engage in acts of protest.

Now that the violence has ended, another issue that has moved into the spotlight involves the rapid-fire detention of numerous current and former DPP officials, some of whom have been held incommunicado without being formally charged. The situation has prompted a number of scholars and experts, including former Far Eastern Economic Review bureau chief Julian Baum and former American Institute in Taiwan chairman Nat Bellocchi, to publish an open letter on the "erosion of justice in Taiwan". In addition, one of the detainees, Yunlin County Commissioner Su Chih-fen 蘇治芬, refused offers of bail and launched a hunger strike to protest her treatment, which has now resulted in her hospitalization. There now seems scant hope of achieving any form of transitional justice (轉型正義), especially with the return of hero worship of the Chiang’s and the restoration of the name Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (國立中正紀念堂).

Some people claim that Taiwan is returning to the dark days of martial law and authoritarian rule. This is a gross and unfair exaggeration. Instead, what we are witnessing now seems more like the late 1980s, when democratization was just beginning but the KMT still held an overwhelming monopoly on power, with the executive branch displaying unbridled arrogance and the judicial branch running amok. One of the few ways for opposition elements to express their concerns was through street protests, some of which unfortunately turned violent and were soon followed by crackdowns launched under the banner of "law and order".

Whatever the future may hold, the current situation represents a great shame and loss of face for a country that has prided itself on its tolerance of free expression and respect for human rights. For its part, the opposition needs to follow the path of non-violence so clearly laid out by renowned leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. As for the government, it has an obligation to show greater restraint in the face of peaceful protests, as well as respect the views and needs of those with legitimate concerns about the state of the nation.