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TAIWAN: US, European academics urge human rights talks

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DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS: The group of 12 experts held a forum in Taipei and met with officials to discuss religion, freedom, democracy and human rights issues

By Cynthia Chen

Taipei Times (14.04.2023) – It is well known that transitioning from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one

takes time. Taiwan defines its authoritarian period from 1945 to 1992, when martial law was lifted in Kinmen County, despite it ending five years earlier in the other counties.

Nevertheless, authoritarianism has persisted in the judicial and administrative bureaucracies, and it is impossible to suddenly become democratic overnight. Therefore, there are still many cases of human rights violations committed by government officials with authoritarian attitudes that have not been rectified. These cases have drawn the attention of academics and human rights advocates in Europe and the US.

Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne, who is editor-in-chief of religious magazine Bitter Winter and a world-renowned academic, led a group of international academics and human rights experts to Taiwan.

Among the group is Belgium-based non-governmental organization Human Rights Without Frontiers director and cofounder Willy Fautré.

Every year, these academics select a country and host international forums on human rights and religious freedom. This year, the International Forum on Peace and Human Rights/Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Global Issue was held at the Tsai Lecture Hall at National Taiwan University's College of Law.

The group voiced support and encouragement for Taiwan, saying that Taiwan's efforts and progress toward freedom, democracy and human rights are its most valuable assets.

However, they were concerned about unresolved cases of human rights abuses in the nation's post-authoritarian period, such as the case of the Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy.

Several Taiwanese organizations, including the Taiwan Human Rights Think Tank, the New School for Democracy and Citizen Congress Watch, invited the group of 12 academics and human

rights experts from Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and the US, as well as editors and journalists from media outlets, to visit government agencies and human rights institutions, so the group could gain a deeper understanding of the values of democracy and freedom in Taiwan.

The academics and experts have close ties with Taiwan.

Italian journalist Marco Respinti, who is a member of the International Federation of Journalists, an essayist, translator and lecturer, as well as director-in-charge of Bitter Winter, was invited to speak at the international public hearing on Uighur issues organized by the legislature's Taiwan Parliamentary Human Rights Commission in 2021.

Fautré received delegates from the Control Yuan in 2009, when they visited Belgium for an exchange program.

In 2019, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) delivered an opening speech and then-US ambassador at large for international religious freedom Sam Brownback delivered remarks at an international forum at the Howard Hotel on civil society dialogue that focused on defending freedom of religion and belief in the Indo-Pacific region.

Bitter Winter editor-in-chief Massimo Introvigne, deputy editor-in-chief Rosita Soryte and director-in-charge Marco Respinti visited Taiwan to participate in the forum.

On Thursday last week, the group met with Legislative Speaker You Si-kun (游錫堃).

"We hope that this day would be an opportunity for all of us to appreciate the religious diversity existing in Taiwan and vibrant religious pluralism seen here," Introvigne said.

"As I mentioned in each part of the world, there are still issues to be resolved, for instance in many international

conferences. While Taiwan is generally praised for its attitude for religious liberty, there are sessions about the case about a spiritual group called Tai Ji Men," he said.

"Several American scholars have studied this issue, including professor Westbrook, who is with us today," he said, adding that there are other academics who have studied the Tai Ji Men case, but were unable to visit Taiwan due to personal reasons.

Introvigne said the academics were interested in Taiwanese human rights issues, adding that "you may rest assured that you will find in all of us, and also in our magazine Bitter Winter, true friends and defenders of Taiwan, and it is for this reason that we can assist you in solving some domestic problems. We will humbly cooperate too."

One of Taiwan's neighbors likes to use some of the nation's internal issues to attack Taiwan in the international arena, Introvigne said, adding that "when you are attacked, and when the freedom of Taiwan is threatened, we feel we are all Taiwanese."

"From my experience, I can only say that in a truly democratic country such as Taiwan, problems are normally always solved through dialogue between all interested parties," he said.

"We pay attention to domestic problems in Taiwan because we are friends of Taiwan," he said.

You said that the professor specifically mentioned the Tai Ji Men case, and that he would continue to pay attention to this issue.

The group are from more developed and democratic countries, You said, adding that he welcomes their views on how the government can deal with the issues of the political system, and that he is willing to follow their recommendations while maintaining judicial independence to help Tai Ji Men.

On Saturday last week, the group visited the National Human Rights Museum, where they were given an English-language tour by White Terror era victim Chin Him-san (陳希山), which provided a deep understanding of the authoritarian period.

Several group members expressed shock and disbelief after the tour.

The group on Tuesday visited the Control Yuan's National Human Rights Commission, accompanied by Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Pusin Tali, who was appointed by Tsai in 2019.

International exchanges and cooperation are very important, Citizen Congress Watch chairman Tseng Chien-yuan (曾建元) said, adding that they allow the world to see the progress of Taiwan's democracy.

He said he hopes that there will be more cooperation with international human rights experts, so Taiwan can catch up with international human rights standards and continue to progress.

After visiting the Control Yuan, the academics concluded their visit.

The group would continue to participate in Taiwan-related conferences on freedom of religious belief, and pay attention to Taiwan's democracy, freedom and human rights to ensure that Taiwan continues to be a symbol of Asian countries.

The group hopes that by resolving cases of persecution during the post-authoritarian period, Taiwan's democratic system will be strengthened.

Photo: A group of academics and experts meet with Legislative Speaker You Si-kun, sixth right, in Taipei on Thursday last week. Credits Taipei Times

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