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Essay

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Transition to Democracy at the Expense of Justice: The 2-28 Incident and White Terror in Taiwan

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This essay is part of the Middle East-Asia Project (MAP) series on “Pathways to Transitional Justice in the Arab World — Reflections on the Asia Pacific Experience.” The series explores the pursuit of transitional justice in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, and how such efforts could be informed by past and ongoing justice processes in Asia-Pacific countries. See Resources ...



In Taipei's Peace Park.

This paper discusses attempts at reconciliation that followed Taiwan's transition to democracy after four decades (1947–1987) of political repression in which new settlers from the Chinese mainland, known as *waishengren* (provincial outsiders), suppressed a native population, known as *benshengren* (provincial natives), that had formerly experienced 50 years (1895–1945) of Japanese colonial rule. As a case study, I draw on field research undertaken between 2004 and 2006 in the village of Luku. I ask to what extent Taiwan has redressed the defining massacre that occurred on February 28, 1947, known as the 2-28 Incident, and the repression that followed, known as the White Terror (1949–1986). To what extent can Taiwan be sure that state terror will not recur? Further, what lessons are there for the “Arab Spring?” These questions are not answerable in absolute terms, but they provoke critical reflection on incidents of state violence.

Democratization in Taiwan was driven by a discourse of ethnic inequality between *waishengren* and *benshengren*, but it avoided serious economic disruption and social conflict in arriving at its goal of elections and a multi-party, or more precisely, two-party, system. Since the transition to democracy, politics in Taiwan have been split between a “Blue” camp, which supports the KMT (Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party) and advocates for unification with China, and a “Green” camp, which supports the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) and wants independence for Taiwan. It has been difficult, if not impossible, to construct an agreed-upon account about past state terror in democratic Taiwan due to divisions between the Blue and Green perspectives.

Chiang Ching-kuo, the authoritarian KMT leader and son of Chiang Kai-shek, announced the end of military rule in 1987, shortly before his death. His successor, Lee Teng-hui, was a *benshengren*; in his presidential inauguration in 1988 he appealed to his fellow citizens to forget the past and to look forward, but this did not satisfy many people in a new era of democratic accountability. Lee began to try to settle accounts of Taiwan's past; Ching-kuo was portrayed as the initiator of democracy, and his followers—collaborators with the repressive regime, even if they had not all been perpetrators of abuses themselves—stayed in power during a period when the truth about the past was starting to become a matter of public discussion.

The opposition DPP was born out of an ethnic (*benshengren*) struggle for political participation and voting rights. It skillfully used the KMT violence to open discussion about past events, and it connected popular demands in regard to incidents of repression, such as the release of secret files, an official apology, financial compensation, and memorials, with its own programs for liberal democratization and Taiwanese nationalism. For a period, the opposition appeared unified and in command of a coherent platform linked to a meaningful version of the past; remembering the 2-28 Incident and the White Terror went together with voting for the DPP, which controlled the presidential office from 2000 to 2008.

In 1990, President Lee opened government files and commissioned an “Executive Yuan Research Team on the February 28 Incident.” Historians undertook this state-level investigation, but retired KMT-affiliated politicians headed it. The report explained that Chiang Kai-shek had exercised insufficient oversight of his subordinates’ operations in Taiwan and that he did not punish any military or political officials who had enacted the slaughter and repression. This posthumous censure of Chiang Kai-Shek’s failure to prevent abuses was as far as apportioning responsibility to officials went. However, there was also increasing recognition of the suffering and loss that had occurred. In 1991, all legislators held a silent tribute to the victims for the first time; in 1992, the first state commemoration was held in the form of a symphony concert for survivors and victims’ families; and in 1995, Lee apologized for the Incident, recognizing it as “Taiwan’s most significant historical event.”

In the same year, Taiwan’s parliament (the Legislative Yuan) passed a bill providing compensation for those wrongly imprisoned or executed during the martial law period, either for sedition or for being communist spies. A “Foundation for Compensating Improper Verdicts” was created in 1998 to handle the compensation claims for the 2-28 Incident, and three years later another similar organization was established for the victims of the White Terror. These were not courts but statutory bodies under the administration of the Executive Yuan. Reparations were set at 500,000 New Taiwan dollars for each year of imprisonment, with a ceiling of NT \$5 million, and NT \$6 million (\$198,000 USD) for execution or disappearance. In total, there were 2,152 compensation cases approved concerning the 2-28 Incident, including 681 for executions. As for the White Terror, 6,022 cases were approved, including 699 for executions and 53 for life imprisonment sentences. Between 1989 and 2002, 20 memorials were erected at execution sites around the island, and a museum dedicated to the 2-28 Incident opened in Taipei in 1997.

In 1998, Lee advocated a more inclusive “new Taiwanese” identity in an attempt to calm ethnic tensions and a decade of protest-style 2-28 Incident commemoration. Newly-Taiwanized members within the KMT and the centrist DPP both wanted to project a past that would promote democratic consolidation, ethnic harmony, and political stability. To this end, a carefully composed text was produced and inscribed on the memorials. For the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the 2-28 Incident, then-Vice President Lien Chan addressed the Incident as a “historical mistake” and asked people to move beyond the “sorrowful, nebulous, and old era” with “grace and understanding.” He also indicated that Taiwan should “tender the truth unto history, clear the victims of their unjust charges, clarify misunderstandings, and wipe out the hidden concern for ethnic tension.”^[1]

In addition to the Executive Yuan team’s text, other accounts of events relating to state violence have been published. These include investigative reports undertaken at the local governmental level and academic research papers, as well as literature and films. However, even now there is no agreement over the numbers of those killed or missing. Further, it remains highly controversial as to why violence erupted in the way that it did in 1947. The 2-28 Incident had been sparked by KMT officials assaulting a Taiwanese street vendor, a widow named Lin Jiang-mai, who had been selling untaxed cigarettes. The officials were chased away by a crowd, but one man was killed when the officials fired back into the crowd.

In the days that followed, Taiwanese notables formed “2-28 Settlement Committees” and even made proposals for political reform, but Governor Chen Yi secretly requested military reinforcements from the KMT on the mainland; soldiers under the command of General Peng Meng-chi at Kaohsiung killed many civilians. From March to May there were numerous arrests and executions in an operation across the island called “village sweeping.”

According to one historical perspective that has been particularly promoted by the Green camp, Taiwanese inhabitants who expected to be welcomed into the new Chinese government after Japanese rule instead experienced discrimination and repression. The KMT declared that the Taiwanese had been “enslaved” by the Japanese and given a “sordid education.” This stigma marked Taiwanese as second-class citizens, and led to distrust or even hatred of them. Discriminatory treatment resulting from this attitude soon led to an outburst of violence.

In contrast, a revisionist perspective that has recently been adopted by some members of the Blue camp argues that military force was used legitimately to restore order. For the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the 2-28 Incident, a scholar named Huang Zhang-jian published a book entitled *Transcription of Textual Research on the Truth about the 2-28 Incident*; his account is mainly based on KMT sources. He takes the view that Governor Chen’s appeal for military reinforcements from the mainland was unavoidable and that the brutal military suppression that followed, particularly under the authority of Peng Meng-chi, was justifiable. He suggested that the 2-28 Settlement Committees were infiltrated by “rebels and thugs,” including communists, criminals, and Taiwanese youths formerly in the Japanese army, and that the Taiwanese had sought help from the United States to achieve independence. The source for this claim is the testimony of Peng Meng-chi (who had a reputation among Taiwanese as the “Butcher of Kaohsiung”), provided by his son Peng Yin-gang.

It is widely understood in Taiwan that there has been weak demand for transitional justice on the part of the people, particularly with fresher memories of rapid economic growth and increasing material prosperity and comfort. However, this is not the case at Luku, a village where more people were imprisoned or executed than in any other single incident during the White Terror. I encountered strong demands for justice there; a widow whose husband had been executed said, “Not talking about the incident does not stop me from remembering it. Every night in bed when it is quiet, I think of it and cry into my pillow.” She asked the same question again and again: “Who is responsible for my husband’s death?”

As I worked with another group of victims at Luku, several interviewees repeated the same story, that is, that a villager named Zhou Xi-yuan had falsely denounced residents of the village to the KMT as being communists, resulting in many innocent villagers being wrongly sentenced. This village traitor had worked as a KMT cadre and had enjoyed a comfortable life, but he died young in a car accident on the anniversary of the day on which those villagers had been executed. The villagers believed that ghosts seeking revenge and justice were haunting him. Reflecting on these cases, the problem appears to be twofold: that the channels for seeking justice are weak and that people feel incapable of publicly expressing their desires, instead resorting to religious and magical notions to imagine justice. Rather than true restitution, financial compensation has amounted to a substitute for justice in Taiwan. Also, claims made by actual communists or their families were excluded from compensation. Compared with the compensation given in other countries, Taiwan’s reparation for the loss of human life and freedom is not very generous.

Taiwan went through a decade (1987–1997) during which investigations took place, reports were published, compensation

money was paid, and memorials were erected. February 28 was declared a national holiday, Taipei New Park was renamed the 2-28 Peace Park, and the Incident began to be studied as part of Taiwan's history in schools. However, in the next decade (1997–2007) people in Taiwan, encouraged by the government, began to dwell less on the subject in public in the interest of democratic consolidation, ethnic harmony, and political stability. In the years since 2008, KMT President Ma Ying-jeou has stated that because he offered an apology, the actual number of those killed or missing is no longer important. In 2013, though, an amendment to “The Regulations for Handling of and Compensation for the 2-28 Incident” was initiated by the DPP, and the compensation application deadline was extended for another four years. In 2014, the Ministry of Education under the KMT government was criticized for replacing the term “White Terror” in the curriculum with “abuse of government power,” and for moving from a Taiwan-oriented perspective to a China-oriented perspective. The secretary general of the Taiwan Association for the Care of the Victims of Political Persecution during the Martial Law Period said that the change “is not only doing too little for transitional justice, it is also obliterating history.”

In conclusion, I would like to return to the three questions raised at the beginning. Firstly, the processes of transitioning to democracy have shaped Taiwan's attempt to redress transitional justice. Taiwan's democracy was born in the 1990s, and it is the first in the history of Chinese civilization. Yet it has not gone further than voting and a politics of ethnicity. Taiwanese ethnic injustice has been at the core of a heated debate in the historiography of the 2-28 Incident and the White Terror. The public understanding of the truth and of how right and wrong should be judged remains divided according to pro-KMT/Blue and pro-DPP/Green versions, and is interpreted within ongoing rival (Chinese versus Taiwanese) nation-building processes. Moreover, Taiwan's democratic reform and subsequent transitional justice were both launched from and directed by political parties. Though there have been initiatives to erect memorials and grant compensation money, both the KMT and DPP have been unwilling to try and sentence perpetrators or give recognition to those victims who actually were communists. The authorities' implicit attitude seems to be that when they give compensation money, they at the same time buy the submissiveness of surviving victims and their family members. The intention is to keep victims quiet and passive for the sake of the so-called “collective social good” of democratic consolidation, ethnic harmony, and political stability. This attitude looks more like charity given out of pity than just compensation, and it further leaves the impression that those who suffered did so because they encountered misfortune rather than because they were victims of state violence. My informant's question about who was responsible for her husband's death remains unanswered, and as such there is ongoing collusion with historical injustice. This means that the whole of Taiwanese society must take responsibility for the lack of consensus on a past that could be known objectively.

Secondly, these efforts are not sufficient to guarantee that state terror and violence will not occur again in Taiwan. Compensation for those recognized as the “right” victims (that is, non-communists), along with some non-specific public memorializing, is seen as amounting to “justice.” Although democracy has granted Taiwan's citizens the right to elect representatives, the hierarchy of power relations has not changed fundamentally: the social order and human relationships are still to a great extent defined by Confucian concepts and practices about power and authority. In Taiwan's case, “transition” and “justice” remain two unlinked or even contradictory domains. They remain disconnected from one another because the elements that would link them, an impartial general consensus on historical truth and an impartial sense of right and wrong, are absent. In the West, “justice” is seen as transcendent and universal, and refers to the quality of being impartial and thus the ability to be just and fair. However, Confucian culture emphasizes hierarchical relatedness and reciprocal righteousness. There is no Chinese equivalent to the English word “justice,” and although the term is translated as *zheng* (uprightness) *yi* (righteousness), both concepts are defined in the context of vertically organized human relationships rather than of impartiality. This is not an orientalist observation determined to find an essential problem in Chinese culture, but rather a recognition that aspects of that culture mitigate the ability of a people not just to speak truth

to power but also to achieve redress for injustice.

Thirdly, Taiwan can provide lessons for the “Arab Spring” through its inadequacy in applying transitional justice. It is important to recognize that no one except the victims themselves can say whether forgetting or remembering is better for them. Rather than being instructed by the government or by society about a politically correct way of forgiving and forgetting for the greater good, the victims have the moral right to choose how to remember and what to forget, and also to know who was responsible for their loss and suffering. Further, it is important to realize that the issue of justice is not only an individual matter, but also a social matter. “Perfect justice”—namely, identifying just institutional arrangements at a transcendental level—may be impossible to achieve, but compensation is no substitute for justice. Dealing with justice has risks, but it helps to heal wounds and to develop an impartial general consensus about historical truth and an impartial assessment of wrong and right. The process will always be incomplete, but it must also be always ongoing. Justice-seeking is good for civic life, both at individual and societal levels, and is required for democracy to function. Democracy is not only “democracy as voting,” but also “democracy as public reasoning.” In this way, democracy is truly consolidated through justice and not political expediency.

[1] Robert Edmondson, “The February 28 Incident and National Identity,” *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan*, ed. Stéphane Corcuff (New York: M.E. Sharpe Publishers, 2002), 39.