

Special Session
– State Violence and Trauma

The Meilidao Incident: Turning Point in Taiwan's Political Development

Hua-Yuan HSUEH [National Chengchi University Professor]

1. Introduction
2. Background and limitations of Chiang Ching-kuo's Innovative Security Board Policy
3. Changes in the international situation and political developments in Taiwan
4. The Meilidao Incident and the reform forces in Taiwan
5. Political development after the Meilidao Incident
6. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The period from 1979 to 1980 witnessed significant incidents that would have long-lasting impacts in the history of political development in Northeast Asia. One major incident was in Korea in late 1979, when the political situation became unstable following the assassination of President Park Chung-hee, in which Chun Doo-hwan staged an army-led coup. In Taiwan, on the other hand, opposition figures held political rallies, leading to clashes with the military and police, which eventually led to the arrest of many elites. In Korea in 1980, opposition figures held demonstrations, the most serious of which took place in Gwangju. The May 18 Pro-democracy Movement took place when the Chun administration forcefully suppressed the democratic movement driven by progressive figures demanding reform. In Taiwan, the arrested opposition elites were tried in Meilidao. Major key figures were tried in the military court, but most were put on judicial trial due to external and American coercion. After many opposition elites were deprived of their freedom, the political power of the opposition also faced a crisis for quite a while.

However, the incidents did not completely diminish the political capacity of the opposition. In Korea, there was continued resistance by opposition figures against the Chun administration, and Roh Tae-woo's administration that followed it. In Taiwan, in the 1980s after the Meilidao military trial, opposition figures again began to gather in public, more advanced than before, creating an atmosphere calling for political reform of the Kuomintang (KMT) Party. In some respects, the Meilidao incident played a major role in Taiwan's opposition protests, especially in the development of non-party forces into the Democratic Progressive Party. With opposition elites calling for political reform, and Taiwan's development direction gradually established, it was able to develop in line with the international situation. Especially, with the U.S. interest in Taiwan's development of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and the growing desire within Taiwan for political and social reform, martial law was lifted at the end of Chiang Ching-kuo's reign in the late 1980s. Although Chiang chose the National Security Law instead of martial law, the effect of lifting martial law was weaker than expected. Nevertheless, this was an indisputable major incident in Taiwan's political reform history. Since the Meilidao incident, Taiwan's political development has had a marked change, which meant Taiwan began to develop toward free and democratic politics.

2. Background and limitations of Chiang Ching-kuo's Innovative Security Board Policy

During its rule, the Kuomintang (KMT) Party tried to coerce Taiwan's elites to participate in politics. The legitimacy of the Republic of China gradually faded, with the international community instead recognizing the People's Republic of China. The People's Party began implementing its innovative security board policy in the early 1970s, as Chiang Ching-kuo took power. At one time, some political experts praised the policy for enabling the KMT to strengthen freedom and democratic reform. However, the main purpose of the policy was to consolidate the KMT's legitimacy in governing Taiwan. In practice, the policy included two things: first, when appointing personnel of the party organizations, including the party headquarters, other organizations, and the central government (including the heads of ministry), a political elite of Taiwanese nationality shall be selected. In other words, the existing Taiwan political elite is divided into central and local levels. Local-level political elites include the city mayors and provincial assemblymen, who are elected through direct elections and thus have a strong support base of public opinion. The political elites (including Taiwan's president) belonging to the central level must be in the favor of a high-ranking member of the KMT Party, consisting of outsiders and their descendants. The most noticeable change after the implementation of the innovative security board policy was that, deviating from the past, many of the political elites of the government departments in the center of the KMT Party have been selected from Taiwanese national figures, applying Taiwan's original color. Additionally, there was an election to increase the number of lawmakers in the central institution. Regular elections were held to increase the number of lawmakers in the central institution. Although there was no need for re-election because there was a limit to increasing the number of seats in the central institution and the first National Assembly representative was still monopolizing it, a large number of lawmakers were elected, publicizing that lawmakers also could participate in central politics.

Such superficial reforms were essentially different from the realization of liberal democracy. Moreover, due to the long-term martial law, the national mobilization for suppression of the communist rebellion system, and a legal system that suppressed other opinions by punishing insurgency, Taiwan was not able to escape the shade of the White Terror, and essentially only led to a slight level of change. In other words, at the time the innovative security board policy was implemented, the "One China" myth was also hit hard when the external legitimacy of KMT Party authorities was severely weakened and Chinese representation in the UN was lost in 1971. Furthermore, many Taiwan-national political elites called for a conditional compromise for participation in central politics.

However, there was structural change in Taiwanese society in the course of the KMT implementing the innovative security board policy and conditional reform. In the 1970s, small and medium-sized enterprises began to grow, experts in society as a whole increased, and the proportion of medical doctors, lawyers, accountants, and architects in Taiwan increased. In other words, the middle class supporting political reform grew, which was a fundamental problem for the KMT after adopting the innovative security board policy.

3. Changes in the international situation and political developments in Taiwan

In the 1970s, when the government of the Republic of China lost its representation in the United

Nations, all international affairs were unfavorable both to the government of the Republic of China, and to Taiwan, which it governed. However, even in this situation, a green light had been lit for Taiwan's political development. In the past, Taiwan was in an important position in terms of international strategy. Democratic forces centered around the United States were much more interested in strategic interests than in Taiwan's political development. Therefore, while supporting Taiwan's government of the Republic of China, they had some limitations in voicing their interest in reforming Taiwan's freedom, democracy and human rights. Around 1970, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union had a serious conflict on the border, and the U.S. extensively revised its Asian blockade policy accordingly. The United States wanted to join hands with the government of the People's Republic of China and establish cooperative relations, in order to implement a strong containment policy against the Soviet Union, and benefit from issues with China's neighbors, such as Vietnam. That way, Taiwan's strategic position plummeted. As it lost its position representing China in the UN, its existing allies also began to withdraw their diplomatic ties with the Republic of China. As the international situation changed, the U.S. strategy on Taiwan's political development also changed rapidly. In January 1979, structural change took place when the U.S. government decided to pay attention to Taiwan's freedom, democracy, and human rights through the 'Taiwan Relations Act', even though the U.S. no longer recognized the Chinese government.

The first opposition party movement after the Taiwan war in 1960 was concluded when the KMT Party authorities arrested Lei Chen. The U.S. Embassy in Taipei and the State Council said they supported Taiwan's democratic reforms, but did not want radical democratization. They feared that Taiwan's political elites leading the nation's politics through liberalization and democratic reforms could harm America's strategic interests due to a lack of experience with the Chinese People's Republic of China government or the Communist Party of China. Looking at the political orientation specified in the 'Taiwan Relations Act', it takes Taiwan's liberal and democratic development as an important criterion, and this change in orientation had a very direct impact on Taiwan's political development since.

4. The Meilidao Incident and the reform forces inside Taiwan

With the central government's increase of lawmakers in the 1970s, regular elections to increase the number of central government lawmakers have become a channel of public opinion communication with Taiwan's opposition political elites, and additionally, an important channel for opposition political elites to win public support. The goal was to get opposition candidates interested in Taiwan's overall political development through elections. However, as this argument could hurt the political pride of the KMT Party, they called it an 'election leave'. Yet this gave Taiwan's opposition elites the opportunity to attack and challenge the electoral system monopolized by the KMT Party through political means of exchanging and cooperating with each other, and allowed opposition candidates to form a support base for public opinion. In the past, state governmental authority often took certain actions or norms that worked against opponents when conducting elections, and engaged in illegal activities to ensure that the KMT Party has a favorable seat, even in the election process. For example,

the KMT Party candidate has often won the election in illegal ways through misbehavior, and unfair competition to have soldiers, government officials, and faculty members support the KMT Party candidates using governmental authority, and buying the vote.

As such, the opposition elites needed some connection to be able to compete in the election. This had already been proven in Taiwan's local elections in the 1950s. However, since the party establishing movement of the Chinese Democratic Party was suppressed in 1960, the establishment of a party had been considered as taboo in Taiwanese politics, and for this reason, the opposing elites could not easily propose the establishment of a party.

However, with the implementation of the innovative security board policy, structural changes took place through the interaction of all elections and political links, and those figures outside the party exchanged and communicated through elections, and finally election campaigns took place throughout Taiwan. The effect came out in five rounds of public office elections in 1977. Candidates opposing the KMT Party won the highest number of votes since 1960 in both city mayoral elections and provincial assembly elections, and cooperation among those figures outside the party achieved greater results. This urged the government to carry out a joint agenda in all Taiwan through the party's election race for all non-party members during the 1978 election to increase the number of central government assemblymen. This was a much more aggressive move than in the past. Unfortunately, during the election, U.S. President Carter abruptly declared that he would establish diplomatic relations with the government of the People's Republic of China on January 1, 1979, and refused to recognize the Republic of China government anymore. Thus the Chiang Ching-kuo government said it would temporarily suspend the central government's election to increase the number of assemblymen. The opposition political elites, having lost their political foothold in the election, voiced their opinions by communicating directly with the public through speeches and other methods. These were major changes in Taiwan's political world before the Meilidao Incident.

After the election was suspended, the Meilidao magazine company was set up, at a time when no one knew when the election would resume. As well as a magazine company, Meilidao was also an organization that linked most of Taiwan's opposition political elites at the time. Setting up branch offices in each province enabled opposition figures in the center to cooperate with opponents in the provinces. Thus, the 'unnamed party' began to form in a flexible but political way. However, political activities carried out by figures outside the party in each province caused frequent clashes with intelligence security agencies. In addition, the KMT Party rightists tried to suppress opponents in a violent and threatening manner outside the system. Eventually, on December 10, 1979, the 'Kaohsiung Incident' took place, when opposition figures clashed with the military and police at the General Assembly of Citizens commemorating World Human Rights Day in Kaohsiung. Seizing the opportunity, the KMT Party arrested a large number of opposition elites, and even those who did not take part in the Kaohsiung Incident. It is clear that Chiang Ching-kuo wanted to maintain existing political reforms and stabilize the regime by suppressing opponents under the pretext of this incident.

However, the international situation and the atmosphere in Taiwan was different from the past. As the KMT Party suppressed political elites outside the party, overseas political circles began to intervene,

forcing Chiang to step back. Since then, the Meilidao military trial had a profound impact on Taiwan's development. After the public trial, opposition figures' ideology toward Taiwan's future and democratic political reform spread through the media and gained wide support. Taiwan's anti-government forces were quickly able to find their voices through this open trial.

On September 28, 1982, members of the Taipei City Council outside the party presented six agenda items on political reform through the 'Municipal Administration Research Social Gathering'. The agenda included the enactment of the Taiwan Basic Law, which provided in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution that the Taiwanese future be decided by the nation's 18 million citizens, martial law be lifted, the National Assembly face reorganization, and the bans on establishing new parties and on newspaper publishing be lifted. This agenda formalized the demands of political reform that had been made by nonparty figures before the Meilidao Incident. In 1983, about 20 political agendas were re-introduced through the 'Central Sponsorship Association outside the party', and among them, the residents' right to decide was again brought forward. However, there was no further mention of removing the ban on new political parties. In the 1985 election, political groups outside the party put forward the slogan "New Party, New Environment, Let's Save Taiwan". On September 28, 1986, outside the Party, a recommendation meeting of the Election Sponsorship Association was scheduled before the central assembly election. On the basis of this, the ban on the establishment of a party was lifted by temporarily passing the bill to establish the Democratic Progressive Party. As a result, they began to continuously demand further developed political reform.

On the other hand, the KMT Party was forced to implement policy reforms due to several human rights violations, political incidents and misbehaviors since the 1980s. In 1981, Dr. Chen Wen-cheng, who was teaching at Carnegie Mellon University in the U.S., was found dead at the campus of Taiwan University after a meeting with a police chief. The cause of death was unknown. However, figures outside the party suspected that the police chief was involved in Chen's death. In 1982, Tao Bai-chuan, a senior member of the KMT Party and a national adviser to the president, posted an article in the Independent Evening Newspaper titled "How can you use a knife even if there is a right path in the banned book", in which he referred to the police chief's investigation and prohibition of the publication as an "abuse of authority". He also proposed ensuring freedom of speech, publication, and newspapers. Upon hearing the news, the police chief called together several media, planning to 'besiege and suppress' Tao. In the same year, Wang Ying-hsien jumped to his death after being unable to endure the torture and pressure of the police forcing him to falsely confess to having committed a 'Lishker' incident. In 1984, U.S. citizen Jiang Nan (real name Liu Yi-liang), who gained fame for his biography of Chiang Ching-kuo, was assassinated at his home in San Francisco. In addition, Wang Shih-ling, director of the military intelligence bureau of the Ministry of National Defense, Hu Yi-min, deputy director, Chen Hu-man, deputy manager of the third division, and Chen Chi-ri and Wu Dun of Bamboo Union were indicted and sentenced to prison for their involvement in the incident. In the case of a serious violation at Taipei's 10th Credit Cooperative in 1985, the government already recognized the seriousness of the incident and issued a business suspension order on February 8 of that year. However, the suspension was not immediate, only effective from February 11, allowing time to withdraw a large sum of money

메모 포함[W사1]: Is this correct?

from the cooperative. Lu Lun-kang and Shi Rider, the heads of the Ministry of Finance and Economy, stepped down from office in the wake of the incident.

The United Newspaper and China Times, which had good relations with the ruling party at the time, also chose to criticize the aforementioned series of incidents rather than remain silent. The murders of Chen Wen-cheng and Zhang Nan were also linked to the U.S. The Jiang Nan incident was also related to Chiang Xiaowu, son of Chiang Ching-kuo, which the U.S. was particularly interested in. In an official statement that dealt a significant blow to the honor of himself and the KMT Party, Chiang Ching-kuo stated that the next president should be elected in accordance with the Constitution, and that the Chiang family would not participate in the next presidential election race. Thus, it was known that the change of government under the constitutional system had become an important direction for Taiwan's future political development. Chiang took a passive attitude toward the Democratic Progressive Party, formed after the lifting of the ban on party establishment on September 28, 1986, rather than overregulating it by not recognizing the opposition party.

With the growing voice of reform both inside and outside Taiwan, Chiang Ching-kuo sought to implement limited political reforms instead of radical and full-scale opening, as he did in the early 1970s. Yielding to the coercive atmosphere, he chose the National Security Law instead of martial law, though even after martial law was lifted, there was still fear of the White Terror, as the government was in a state of national mobilization to suppress the communist rebellion system, and there was a legal provision to punish rebellion. In addition, on August 7, 1987, Chiang ordered the Central Policy Department of the KMT Party to review the issue of reforming the central public opinion institution as soon as possible, and insisted on a voluntary retirement system. In other words, he was passive in realizing democracy in the National Assembly through re-election while insisting on replacing the old by voluntary retirement or natural decline of the existing central assemblymen.

On the whole, as the calls for reform rose, Chiang accommodated himself to reform through the support of the United States, and made a political judgment to lift martial law. This was a very important moment in Taiwan's political reform. However, opponents gained a large support base while constantly demanding political reform. When Li Teng-hui became president, liberalization and democratization reforms were realized, and in 1996, Taiwan became a liberalist country.

6. Conclusion

The Meilidao trial in Taiwan in early 1980, and the May 18 Pro-democracy Movement in Gwangju, Korea, on May 18, 1980, were two major incidents indispensable in the political history of the respective countries. The Meilidao trial began with a clash in Kaohsiung on December 10, 1979. There was also a series of events after the fact and reactions between Taiwan's government authorities and opposition figures. The May 18 Pro-democracy Movement in South Korea was instigated by democratic and progressive reformative figures when Chun Doo-hwan seized power through a military coup and ordered repression following Park Chung-hee's assassination in 1979.

Both were significant incidents that took place in 1980, and have in common their occurrence during the Cold War era, but need to be interpreted internationally from different historical points of view.

First, the military unit that staged the coup in Korea and suppressed Gwangju was a South Korea–U.S. Combined Forces elite unit. That is why the incident reminds Koreans, who had expected U.S. support, of a unit that broke away from the South Korea–U.S. combined forces’ orders, and carried out the bloody suppression of citizens calling for liberal democracy. This is also an important reason for Korea’s dissatisfaction with the United States during the history of Korea’s pro–democracy movement. In the case of Taiwan, in January 1979, the United States no longer recognized the Republic of China when it established diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China. The KMT Party suspended the ongoing central parliamentary elections through the right to emergency disposal under the ‘temporary provision during the period of mobilization for suppression of the communist rebellion’, and those opponents who lost their chances of elections returned to the status of ordinary citizens. However, at the International Human Rights Day celebration in Kaohsiung, police and citizens clashed over a violent crackdown by the military and police, and the KMT Party immediately began to suppress the movement outside the party under the pretext of the incident. However, Taiwan was different from Korea. Korea was dissatisfied with the U.S., but in Taiwan, the United States no longer recognized the Republic of China, but maintained substantive relations with Taiwan under the provisions of the ‘Taiwan Relations Act’ that had the US government watch Taiwan’s development of free democracy and human rights. It can be seen that since the Meilidao Incident, during the Meilidao military trial, the AIT (American Institute in Taiwan), the ‘agent’ of U.S. Congress and the U.S. administration, paid attention to the incident. This is also an important reason why the anti–Taiwan movement was not under all–round oppression. In addition, as a result of the open Meilidao military trial and historically without parallel, opposition figures have won sympathy from the social elites who were pursuing political and democratic reform by promoting the future of Taiwan and the ideology of democratic political development through the mass media. This marked a major turning point in the development of the post–war Taiwan pro–democracy movement.

Prior to the Meilidao Incident, non–party figures presented, as an agreed political view, the 12 items of the political base. As Taiwan was in an emergency system for a long time and was in dire need of reviewing political, social, and economic reforms, they stressed the need to move toward liberalization and democratization. After the election to increase the number of central lawmakers was suspended, they made unprecedented demands, not only to lift martial law but also full–scale re–election of the National Assembly through a ‘national statement’ and that they had the right to decide in one voice. This was also an agenda item on which non–party figures called for reform in unison after the Meilidao Incident.

Since then, the U.S. side has steadily supported Taiwan’s political reform and democratization, Taiwan’s internal reforms have been made with the figures outside the Party and the Democratic Party at the center, and there has been an atmosphere of socially demanding reform. Moreover, with a series of incidents and misdemeanors occurring in the KMT Party administration, Chiang Ching–kuo belatedly lifted the martial law, taking an important step in Taiwan’s political reform history. Chiang wanted to win the support of society through conditional reform, but voices calling for

liberalization and democratization grew day by day. After Chiang's death, President Li Teng-hui accepted many of the reform proposals of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party from the mainland, ended the period of mobilization for suppression of the communist rebellion, and signaled the end of the White Terror era by scrapping the 'rebellion punishment clause' and revising Article 100 of the 'criminal law' in response to public opinion. In addition, he pushed for full-scale re-election of the National Assembly and legislation of local autonomy, and in 1996, he implemented the direct election of the president. As a result, Taiwan, an authoritarian state, reformed as a fully liberal country.