

Taiwan's ruling DPP retreats from endorsing South Korea's martial law

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On December 3, 2024, around 22:30, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol imposed martial law, citing the necessity to battle with “anti-state forces” and security threats from North Korea.

Faced with popular protests and some resistance in the National Assembly, he was compelled to reverse the decree within six hours and withdraw the troops initially sent to implement it.

Like Yoon Suk Yeol, President of the Republic of China (ROC) Lai Ching-te lacks a parliamentary majority. On the declaration of martial law in South Korea, Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) swiftly endorsed it in a Facebook post, comparing the situation in Taiwan to that in South Korea and referring to the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party as “dark evil forces” against which “Team Taiwan” (the ruling DPP) had been fighting.

Faced with outrage and criticism, the DPP quickly deleted the post. It then declared that it “has long opposed authoritarianism and challenged martial law, and its stance has never changed over the years,” condemning the two opposition bourgeois parties for slandering the DPP.

Western media, which had previously depicted Taiwan as a “model of democracy” and China as a “communist totalitarian regime”, have mostly remained mute on this episode. They could not explain why the ruling party of “a thriving democracy” feels nostalgia and an affinity with authoritarianism and dictatorship.

The rot of competing factions of the national bourgeoisie in Taiwan runs deep.

The KMT regime under Chiang Kai-shek was forced to retreat to Taiwan after losing the Chinese civil war. This far-right dictatorship imposed martial law for one of the longest periods in the 20th century, from 1949 to 1987.

The KMT junta subsequently enacted three statutes in succession: Statute for the Punishment of Rebellion in 1949, Statute for the Denunciation and Suppression of Rebels in 1950, and a military tribunal statute in 1956.

These laws gave the KMT regime sweeping power to muzzle criticism and political dissent, subject civilians to arbitrary arrest and/or incommunicado detention without charge or trial, and criminalized free speech, demonstrations, petitions, public gatherings, incitement to strikes, and any behaviour deemed to disseminate misinformation that could disrupt public order.

The ROC was firmly established as an anti-communist stronghold. Reading Karl Marx's *Capital* was punishable by death.

One instance vividly captures the savagery and absurdity of martial law in the ROC. Published in the family supplement of Taipei's *China Daily News* in January 1968, a story from the *Popeye the Sailor*

comic strips featured Popeye and his son purchasing an island. Upon landing, Popeye immediately addressed the uninhabited island nation and began campaigning for president in an uncontested election.

Bo Yang, the Chinese translator for the cartoon and editor of the family supplement, was immediately arrested, tortured, and charged with being a communist operative and attacking the country's supreme leader. He was subsequently court-martialled and sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment.

A US Congressional Research Service report, *Democratic Reforms in Taiwan: Issues for Congress*, stated that an officer of the US government-assigned Military Assistance Advisory Group from 1973 to 1976 indicated that the military justice system of the Taiwan Garrison Command, which enforced martial law and police state measures, was “generally fair.” Moreover, “most U.S. personnel stationed in Taiwan were happy under martial law.”

In 1977, James D. Seymour, an expert on Chinese politics and a professor at New York University, gave testimony before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations in the House of Representatives. He explained the rationale behind the US support for dictatorships, particularly in Taiwan.

Seymour was emphatic about Taiwan's status as a proxy for the US, stating that “the Republic of China is one of those states which owes its very existence to the United States.” Since the 1950s, “we have in effect been keeping the ROC alive” by sending the Seventh Fleet to intervene in the Chinese civil war on its behalf.

He indicated: “Indeed, our role as godfather goes back even earlier.” In 1945, General Douglas MacArthur, the 1st Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, instructed the KMT forces to accept the Japanese surrender on Formosa.

US officials had no qualms about lying to the House of Representatives about gross human rights violations in the ROC. Burton Levin, then-director of the US State Department's Office of ROC Affairs, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, denied any responsibility for human rights breaches in Taiwan.

In 1977, Levin stated that “torture is not a widespread practice in the Republic of China. Our Embassy has contacts in most every segment of society, and we are confident that were torture widespread, we would be aware of it.”

It was patently false to claim that successive US administrations were unaware of state repression against workers, peasants and political dissidents in Taiwan. Richard C. Bush, who served as head of the American Institute in Taiwan, the de facto US embassy on the island, between 1997 and 2002, readily admitted in his book *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations Since 1942*, “Under martial law,

challenges to KMT rule were tried in military courts. Countless Taiwanese dissidents lost their lives or their freedom.” The US, however, insisted that this “should not change (for geopolitical reasons).”

The US suddenly became “aware” of state-sanctioned violence in Taiwan only after Washington formalized ties with the People’s Republic of China and severed diplomatic relations with the ROC in 1979.

Increasingly desperate to stay in power, the KMT regime under Chiang Ching-kuo, Chiang Kai-shek’s eldest son, stepped up its political repression.

On July 3, 1981, Chen Wen-chen, a Taiwanese-born assistant professor of mathematics at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, was found dead on National Taiwan University’s campus in Taipei one day after being interrogated by the Taiwan Garrison Command. Cyril Wecht, a US forensic scientist, believed he was beaten before being thrown to his death.

In October 1984, the Military Intelligence Bureau of Taiwan allegedly ordered the assassination of Henry Liu by gang members in Daly City, California. Liu had dual citizenship in the US and the ROC, and he had previously authored a book denouncing then-President Chiang Ching-kuo. The FBI apprehended the perpetrators, who admitted murdering Liu at the request of the Military Intelligence Bureau.

According to *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations since 1942*, Taiwanese independence advocates sought US approval and accommodation to end martial law. Among its various groups, the Formosan Association for Public Affairs (FAPA) had acted as a conduit for US campaign contributions and played the “Capitol Hill game” since its founding in 1982. Lubricated by big money, some members of the US Congress were eager to fulfill FAPA’s objectives, including “the abolition of Taiwan’s martial law” and the promotion of “the right of self-determination.”

In the late 1990s, FAPA functioned as a DPP front group. After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the DPP government lobbied the US Congress hard for the deployment of 35,000 Taiwanese marines to Iraq with the assistance of FAPA. The US State Department swiftly rejected the request, as imperialist powers relied on continued cooperation with the Chinese Stalinist regime to superexploit Chinese peasant workers.

These peasant workers, deprived of meaningful social and legal rights under China’s household registration system, had become and still constitute the largest pool of cheap, disposable and exploitable labour that has ever existed in Chinese history, some 297 million people.

The US has played a key role in enabling the imposition of martial law in Taiwan and in using the ROC as a junior partner of genocide in Latin America and the Middle East.

Successive DPP governments have sought favor with the US bourgeoisie, which has pitted the ROC against China and raised the issue of Taiwan independence whenever this suits US geostrategic goals.

During her 2022 visit to Taiwan, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made a point of visiting Taiwan’s National Human Rights Museum. The DPP chose the site as a venue for discussions about human rights violations and state repression because the institution purposefully limited the scope of state-sanctioned violence to atrocities committed solely by the KMT, ignoring the pivotal role played by the US in enabling this far-right dictatorship and the conditions under which the

termination of martial law was approved by the US.

Most crucially, subsequent “democratization” in Taiwan was and remains aligned with the objectives of the US imperialist bourgeoisie. This leaves all rival sections of the bourgeoisie in Taiwan essentially unchallenged.

Since its inception, the museum has depicted authoritarianism as a thing of the past while failing to warn working people about the conditions under which the counterrevolutionary dictatorship of the bourgeoisie emerged and can re-emerge. These omissions enable successive DPP governments to contrast their supposed social democratic credentials with KMT despotism.

Consequently, the DPP (be it ruling or in opposition) can accuse those who question US imperialism and the DPP of being traitors, saboteurs, “communist agents,” enemies within and of being complicit in the Chinese bourgeois regime’s “cognitive warfare” against Taiwan. This closely resembles the KMT’s earlier red-baiting campaign, which always blamed any discontent on “evil communist forces.”

Examples abound. In July 2023, DPP presidential candidate Lai Ching-te declared that the January 2024 presidential election in Taiwan would be a “choice between the White House and Zhongnanhai.” The latter was a reference to the compound that houses the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council.

Lai’s remark exemplifies that, just like its far-right predecessor, the DPP represents a comprador ruling class aligned with imperialism and is an example of the dead end of bourgeois nationalism and politics.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has praised Taiwan, which is also an enthusiastic backer of Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians, as “a reliable partner, a vibrant democracy, and a force for good in the world.” Such a remark is reserved exclusively for the comprador bourgeoisie that is answerable solely to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world, and not to the nation’s toiling masses.

The DPP’s support for Yoon Suk Yeol’s martial law decree speaks to the fact that all competing factions of the national bourgeoisie are essentially an instrument of imperialism and none are capable of waging any independent struggle against it. The parliamentary state does not and will not rid itself of class exploitation and national oppression. As Marx and Engels remind us in *The Communist Manifesto*, the battle of democracy can only be won if the working class raises itself to the position of the ruling class and does away with capitalist slavery and national oppression.



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