

PRESS RELEASE

13 January 2009

Freedom House Global Release of *Freedom in the World* Report in Taipei

Internationally-renowned NGO Freedom House held the global release of their flagship publication, *Freedom in the World*, on January 13, 2009 in Taipei, Taiwan, hosted by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD). This marks the first time that Freedom House has launched such a report in Asia.

Opening the event, Dr. Wen-cheng Lin, President of the TFD, stated, "I think we should be proud that this leading international human rights organization places such importance on Taiwan's democratic achievements." Mr. Christopher Walker, Director of Studies of Freedom House, further explained their decision to hold this event in Taiwan, saying

"The democratic idea is under challenge in Asia, more than almost any other, and Taiwan holds a strategic position in the region."

In a presentation of the main findings, Mr. Walker was joined by Professor Bridget Welsh of Johns Hopkins University and Ms. Sarah Cook, Freedom House Asia Researcher. The presentation highlighted the main global and regional trends revealed by the survey, which rates countries on a scale of 1 to 7 on both political rights and civil liberties, in which 1 indicates the highest level of freedom and 7 the lowest. Countries were further grouped into three large categories: "Free," "Partly Free," and "Not Free."

According to Freedom House, freedom retreated in much of the world in 2008, the third year of global decline. Overall, 34 countries registered declines in freedom and 14 registered improvements. Among the regions, Sub-Saharan Africa and the former Soviet Union saw the most reversals. In Sub-Saharan Africa, twelve countries and one territory—about one-fourth of the regional total—experienced setbacks in 2008. In the former Soviet Union, Russia and Georgia, which went to war over South Ossetia, were among the region's notable declines, as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova.

In Asia, Dr. Welsh described the recent trend as one of "considerable gains in political rights in recent years, but not so much in civil liberties." In this year's ranking, China continued to languish near the bottom, with a combined ranking of 6.5, and it was particularly cited by Freedom House for the disappointing failure of the Beijing Olympics to bring meaningful improvements. Nearly 60% of the world's population living in countries ranked "Not Free" by Freedom House are citizens of China. The situation in

Tibet, analyzed separately by Freedom House, also registered a decline after the pre-Olympic crackdown in that territory. China was joined by Burma, North Korea, and Laos as the other countries in Asia being labeled as the "worst of the worst" for having the lowest or second lowest possible ratings.

On the other hand, South Asia saw significant progress, with upgrades of Pakistan, Maldives and Bhutan from "Not Free" to "Partly Free," as well as improvements in Bangladesh and Nepal. Taiwan, despite several worrying developments that occurred in the latter part of 2008, maintained its ranking of "Free" with a combined score of 1.5, the same level as Japan and South Korea. India and Indonesia rounded out the list of "Free" countries in Asia.

Being the first time the report has ever been launched in Asia, the general presentation was followed by a panel discussion to discuss "The State of Democracy in Asia," chaired by TFD President Lin and featuring the Freedom House delegation, joined by two of Taiwan's most eminent social scientists and area experts, Dr. Yun-han Chu of National Taiwan University and Dr. Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao of Academia Sinica.

Dr. Chu said that one of the greatest benefits of the Freedom House approach is its standardized methodology, which enables cross-regional comparisons; for example, he noted that East Asia felt significantly less impact from the "Third Wave" described by Samuel Huntington. Dr. Hsiao added that one of the most significant reasons to focus on Asia is that the region demonstrates that cultural or religious differences seem not to matter in terms of who succeeds in democratization, since we can find examples of both very free and not free countries in each cultural group.

The panelists expressed concern about the impact of the global financial crisis. Mr. Walker commented that "it will create great challenges for all types of states." Dr. Chu noted that the downturn will at least lead to a decline in US influence, and a very severe depression could lead even to collapses in established democracies, as occurred in the 1930s. Dr. Welsh commented that all eyes in the region are on China, which has much more economic influence than it did in 1997, to see how it will cope with the crisis. Ms. Cook noted that the negative impact of China's economic influence on governance is very much related to the quality of institutions in each country; countries such as Cambodia or some countries in Africa have been noticeably affected, but if Taiwan's institutions can remain robust, they should be better able to withstand such pressure.

Speaking just before the inauguration of the new administration in the United States, Freedom House noted the mixed record of the Bush Administration in promoting freedom. Mr. Walker explained that the data show a steady rise from 2000-2005, followed by a fall from 2006 until today. Dr. Hsiao expressed that “although democracy promotion is a good idea, it has been contaminated by the wrong approach taken by the Bush Administration.” Dr. Welsh stated, “The human rights violations by the US have hurt the cause of freedom internationally.”

Regarding Taiwan, the Freedom House team responded to several questions about various issues that arose in the second half of 2008, such as the demonstrations around Chinese envoy Chen Yunlin’s visit, the investigation of former President Chen Shui-bian, etc. In general, Freedom House expressed that they are concerned about these issues, but are waiting to see whether Taiwan’s self-correcting mechanisms can assert themselves before reaching a conclusion as to whether Taiwan’s rating needs to be downgraded. Thus, they said 2009 will be a “critical year” for Taiwan.

The full report, findings, and country rankings are available today on the website of Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org

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