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Engaging the Next Generation of Human Rights Advocates:

A Panel with John Stauffer and Yen-Tu Su

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Speaker

John Stauffer, Civil Rights Defenders

Panelist

Prof. Yen-Tu Su, Academia Sinica

Venue: College of Law, National Taiwan University

10 Nov, 2025

Engaging the Next Generation of Human Rights Advocates

A Panel with John Stauffer and Yen-Tu Su

On November 10, 2025, the WP4 & 5 Taiwan team was honored to invite John Stauffer, Legal Director and Deputy Executive Director of Civil Rights Defenders. He gave us a talk on “**The State of Human Rights Protection in Sweden — and How it Relates to a Global Trend of Democratic Backsliding**” at National Taiwan University College of Law. Research Professor Yen-Tu Su of Institutum Iurisprudentiae Academia Sinica, a leading Constitutional law scholar, joined as the panelist.

In this talk, John Stauffer shared his own professional experience with law students who are the next generation of human rights lawyers and collaborators with civil society organizations. By holding this event, the WP4 and WP5 Taiwan team hopes to mobilize future advocates, as Taiwan’s civil society needs more legally trained professionals to be actively involved in advocacy work.

The speech attracted over fifty law students from multiple universities, including both undergraduate and graduate students. Through active engagement in the discussion and Q&A session, students gained a deeper understanding of human rights advocacy by enhancing their knowledge of comparative constitutional systems, democratic backsliding, and advocacy strategies.

John Stauffer first shared his personal academic and professional background. He is a human rights lawyer with a Master of Laws degree from Stockholm University. Prior to joining Civil Rights Defenders in 2013, he worked at the Ombudsman Against Ethnic Discrimination and later at the Equality Ombudsman, where he was responsible for investigating cases of discrimination. He joined Civil Rights Defenders in order to shift to a civil society focus, working to address domestic human rights violations in Sweden as well as internationally and to strengthen civil society and human rights defenders.

Stauffer then provided an overview of democratic backsliding in Sweden following the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats as the second largest party. Amid increasing political polarization, weakness in Sweden’s rule-of-law framework has become more apparent.

Sweden has a relatively weak position of constitutional law with its more central position of the Parliament. The Constitution can be amended with ease, and the court tends to be judicially constrained. Rather than relying on its own constitutional assessment, courts tend to defer to legislative intent and the preparatory works of legislation. It is also noteworthy that, unlike Taiwan, Sweden does not have a constitutional court. Instead, Sweden relied on an *ex ante* review mechanism for draft legislation to ensure that the Constitution is respected. In recent years, however, this preview mechanism has become increasingly superficial and formalistic. The

government often proceeds with predetermined policy decisions and may request the legislative committees not to examine certain substantive considerations.

This current government's dominance in the legislative process has led to the passage of a huge number of laws with negative implications. John Stauffer highlighted one enacted law and one draft proposal as illustrative examples. First, in response to gang violence and shootings, Sweden enacted legislation allowing police to stop and search individuals in designated zones without any criminal suspicion. This measure has been widely criticized for disproportionately targeting minorities and migrants and for raising concerns about racial discrimination. Second, the Swedish government is currently considering lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 13 in response to the sharp increase in gang violence involving the exploitation of children. Critics have argued that this proposal would undermine child protection and is unable to effectively curb gang violence.

Yen-Tu Su responded to John Stauffer's talk by noting that although the institutional designs are quite different between Sweden and Taiwan, the challenges we face are somehow similar. Yen-Tu Su reflected on why the rise of right-wing politics has become a global phenomenon. He suggested that it may represent a backlash driven by public dissatisfaction with long-established liberal parties and their policies. He further emphasized that the underlying structure and broader political dynamics form an important background to this trend.

Yen-Tu Su also noted that democratic backsliding, as we have seen, can occur rapidly, yet its impacts are profound and cumulative. John Stauffer echoed this analysis, observing that public support for autocratic movements often stems from widespread disappointment with politics perceived as providing little or no benefits, thereby leading to declining trust in government and the erosion of social solidarity.

During the Q&A session, students asked why Sweden does not have an *ex post* judicial review. The HRJust project coordinator, Prof. Maria Grahn-Farley, explained that the original conception of human rights in Sweden developed as a tool to resist monarchical power. Given that the Swedish judges were historically appointed by the King, Sweden entrenched strong parliamentary authority as a counterbalance to the King's power. As a result, in the Swedish context, concerns have traditionally focused less on the constitutionality of legislation and more on the risk of power being placed above the Parliament. Excessive reliance on counter-majoritarian courts is therefore

often perceived as dangerous, as it may evoke fears of restoring monarchical authority.

Another student asked John Stauffer, drawing on Swedish experience, how trust in society can be rebuilt. John Stauffer shared that sustained dialogue is vital and that genuine efforts to understand different perspectives are fundamental to rebuilding social trust. Reflecting on Stauffer's response, an advocate from the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty echoed the significance of conversation and trust-building. She shared that her organization experienced deep frustration following the Taiwan Constitutional Court's decision upholding the constitutionality of the death penalty (113 Hsien-Pan-8: Death Penalty Case). Nevertheless, the organization promptly recalibrated its advocacy strategies, shifting its focus toward public engagement, education, and



humanizing death row prisoners by holding events such as the *Murder by Numbers Film Festival*.

John Stauffer's inspiring speech not only deepened students' understanding of human rights protection in Sweden and the global phenomenon of democratic backsliding but also enhanced their awareness of politics and social advocacy. By highlighting youth-led protests against democratic backsliding, particularly those initiated by Generation Z, the speech inspired and encouraged many law students to become more actively engaged in social movements and legal reform and to envision more active roles for themselves in civil society.



From left to right: Hui-Chieh Su (Moderator; Associate Professor, College of Law, National Taiwan University), John Stauffer (Speaker; Legal Director and Deputy Executive Director, Civil Rights Defenders), Yen-Tu Su (Panelist; Research Professor, Institutum Iurisprudentiae Academia Sinica)

