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Fostering Dialogue Between Taiwanese and Swedish Civil Society:

A Panel with John Stauffer, E-Ling Chiu, and Chao-Ju Chen

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Speaker

John Stauffer, Civil Rights Defenders

Panelists

E-Ling Chiu, Amnesty International Taiwan

Prof. Chao-Ju Chen, College of Law, National Taiwan University

Venue: TouatBooks, Taipei, Taiwan

8 Nov, 2025

Fostering Dialogue Between Taiwanese and Swedish Civil Society *A Panel with John Stauffer, E-Ling Chiu, and Chao-Ju Chen*

On November 8, 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 “**Democratic Backsliding in Europe and the Impact on the Nordics.**” E-Ling Chiu, a long-time human rights activist and the National Director of Amnesty International Taiwan, and Prof. Chao-ju Chen, a prominent scholar of law and society and Distinguished Professor at National Taiwan University College of Law, joined the panel to provide perspectives from Taiwan.

This event was co-organized by the WP4 and WP5 Taiwan team. It was generously supported and actively promoted by the Chang Fo-Chuan Center for the Study of Human Rights and Fu-Zheng Center for Democracy at Soochow University. As the only interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate institute in Taiwan dedicated specifically to human rights studies, the Chang Fo-Chuan Center’s support played an important role in broadening outreach and facilitating participation.

To establish networks between Taiwanese and Swedish civil society, the WP4 and WP5 Taiwan team organized the event at Tò-uat Bookstore. Tò-uat (“Turn Left” in Taiwanese) Bookstore is an independent social movement-themed bookstore founded in 2016 by a group of senior Taiwanese NGO advocates. It aims to serve as a collaborative platform supporting and empowering civil society organizations and NGO workers through [capacity-building events](#), experience sharing, and peer learning.¹

Over 50 attendees packed the venue on a Saturday evening. Participants came from local NGOs covering diversified issues, including human rights, gender equality, migration, and death penalty abolition. The event also successfully engaged younger generations of advocates and students through the outreach of co-organizations and supporting organizations.

In this talk, John Stauffer, together with Taiwanese NGO workers and scholars, shared the challenges they faced amid the trend of democratic backsliding and discussed strategies for addressing these difficulties. The discussion focused in particular on how to counter and push back against governments’ use of human rights justifications and national security justifications.

John Stauffer first introduced the background of his organization, Civil Rights Defenders, a Swedish human rights organization founded in 1982. Civil Rights Defenders primarily partners with and supports human rights defenders internationally and is dedicated to advancing the rule of law. John Stauffer reflected that, in Sweden,

¹Taiwan Rebels Culture Movement, About the Website, <https://taiwanrebels.org/en/pages/27> (last accessed: 2025/01/06)

human rights were long regarded as issues requiring support in the Global South. However, this perception shifted over time with increased efforts to strengthen domestic human rights protection. In recent years, however, political priorities have shifted, and human rights protection and rule of law principles are increasingly undermined in efforts to address immigration and organized crime. These signs of democratic backsliding have become more apparent following the 2022 election. He noted that trust between citizens, as well as between citizens and the government, has significantly shrunk. Amid growing political polarization, Sweden is experiencing a gradual erosion of human rights protections. Measures are taken to silence protesters, and the checking power is weakened.

Civil society is significantly impacted by democratic backsliding. There is a clear risk related to funding, as NGOs that criticize the government have been threatened to have their state funding withdrawn, making NGOs more cautious and less willing to challenge the government openly. While advocacy NGOs that refuse to accept funding from the government are spared the fate of being compelled to remain silent, they continue to face a challenging situation due to their limited resources.

Even though the contexts in Taiwan and Sweden are quite different, civil society in both countries faces some common challenges. First, both countries are facing the erosion of democracy, and the distrust toward the largest opposition parties often makes NGOs hesitant to cooperate with them. E-Ling Chiu noted that Taiwan are not immune to the global wave of democratic backsliding. She mentioned authoritarian practices are no longer confined to openly authoritarian states; they are reinforced by the influence of China and Russia, through transnational repression and political pressure, and echoed in rule-of-law crises seen in countries like Hungary and Slovakia. In Taiwan, this trend is evident in the paralysis of the Constitutional Court, deep cuts to human rights budgets, and the continued failure to pass key human rights legislation. The democratic backsliding became more acute due to the political gridlock in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (Congress) following the formation of a divided government in 2024. In such circumstances, civil society organizations were sometimes put in a bind when attempting to collaborate with major opposition parties in order to counterbalance government overreach. John Stauffer also echoed that the largest opposition party, the Social Democrats, often adopts far-right narratives on migration and criminal policy, making it challenging for civil society to effectively push back.

The second shared concern was political labelling. John Stauffer noted that many NGOs have disappeared in the trend of democratic backsliding. They were labelled as aligned with specific political parties, which undermined their work and consequently forced them into silence. In some cases, dissents against the government were labelled as supporting terrorism. This practice has deepened social divisions, eroded trust among different social groups and citizens, and contributed to the rise of populism. Chao-ju

Chen also observed that criticism of the government was frequently dismissed as fake news, while human rights advocates were portrayed as scapegoats who allegedly threaten national security.

The third is the governments' use of national security as a justification. John Stauffer pointed out that in Sweden, national security discourse was used to justify several pieces of legislation permitting preventive surveillance without any reasonable basis. For instance, security zones (also known as stop-and-search zones) allow police to stop and search individuals within designated areas, with the risk of disproportionately targeting racial minorities. Chao-ju Chen echoed this concern by noting that in Taiwan, freedom of speech was restricted in the name of national security. She observed that since 2018, the government has increasingly used the Social Order Maintenance Act and other statutes to punish the dissemination of "rumors", especially speech related to politics and COVID-19 misinformation. Chao-ju Chen emphasized that while balancing freedom of speech against other competing interests is undoubtedly difficult, this does not mean that free speech should be automatically subordinated.

Lastly, John Stauffer drew on examples from other countries to illustrate how elections can serve as critical moments for change. In these countries, civil societies employed several strategies to counter democratic backsliding, including the development of alternative narratives, the mobilization of society, the use of international pressure and United Nations mechanisms, the forms of youth-led protests, and litigations to challenge legislation.

During the Q&A session, an NGO worker asked how to reach out to people who hold opposing views or who are less engaged with public affairs. John Stauffer responded that forums such as this discussion provide important opportunities for dialogue and communication, and that transnational knowledge and experience exchange are also valuable for fostering closer collaboration among civil society in Taiwan, Sweden, and beyond.

At the conclusion of the event, E-Ling Chiu called on attendees to support and donate to NGOs, emphasizing that enough resources for local NGOs and their sustainability are the basis of such transnational collaboration.



John Stauffer's speech generated very enthusiastic responses. Many participants stayed overtime to continue the discussion with Stauffer, exchanging their views on advocacy challenges and strategies. The enthusiastic and lively discussion attested to the success of this event and our efforts foster the tie between Swedish and Taiwanese civil society, as well as the importance of transnational collaboration in human rights advocacy.