Before, During, and After the Moment Arrives: A Guide to Action for People in Different Positions

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Three Books on Preparing for Transition, Part Three: Action | Free China Movement

This guide follows “When Does the Window for Transition Open?” The previous article answered “when”; this one asks “what can each person do?” It addresses people in different social positions on the mainland and supporters overseas. It covers only public, lawful preparation and principles, without discussing specific individuals, channels, or contact arrangements.

General Framework: Five Principles

1. Make switching sides less costly than resistance. Whether a transition succeeds depends not on the challengers' bravery but on the calculations of members of the old ruling coalition. Every participant should follow the same rule: leave an exit for those who hesitate, offer security and dignity to those who change sides, and maintain ordinary people's daily lives. Anyone who corners opponents into fighting to the end prolongs the old order.

2. Governments may change, but administration must continue. Hospitals must admit patients, wages must be paid, water and electricity must flow, and archives must not disappear (Question 21 of this series, “How Can Administrative Paralysis Be Avoided After a Change of Government?”). The greatest threat to livelihoods during transition is not a political vacuum but administrative shutdown. Protecting administrative continuity means protecting every ordinary person.

3. Avoiding bloodshed takes priority over speed. Refusing orders to fire on civilians is a legitimate ethical boundary for soldiers and police officers. History shows that ending an old order through negotiation (the 1912 model) is far less costly than ending it through conquest.

4. Accountability through law, not revenge. Evidence and trials must determine individual responsibility; the administrative responsibilities of ordinary civil servants must be strictly distinguished from criminal liability (Questions 26–30, the five questions on justice, reconciliation, and institutional safeguards: “Why Does Political Transition Need a Truth Commission?”; “How Should Individual Criminal Responsibility Be Distinguished from Ordinary Civil Servants' Administrative Responsibility?”; “Why Can't Collective Revenge Replace the Rule of Law?”; “How Should Rehabilitation and Compensation for Political Prisoners Be Linked with Judicial Independence?”; and “How Can a New Government Be Prevented from Abusing Emergency Powers as Its Predecessor Did?”). Prohibit collective retaliation, extrajudicial punishment, and the reproduction of old oppression through new power. Transitional justice is not about imprisoning a different group of people; it is about establishing

the rule of law from day one.

5. Preserve records. Orders, documents, accounts, and archives must be preserved, neither destroyed nor scattered. Records are the raw materials of future justice, history, and reconciliation, and the evidence by which those carrying out orders can later speak for themselves. Today's custodians of records are tomorrow's crucial witnesses.

Guidance by Role

1. Ordinary Citizens

- **Now:** Learn about constitutions and the basics of local self-government. Distinguish rumors from facts and develop habits of verification. Protect your household's livelihood and emergency reserves; do not expose your family to needless risks.
- **During the moment:** Do not join mobs, looting, or vigilante punishment. Protect vulnerable neighbors and ordinary people perceived as being on the "other side." Share only verified information; be the terminus of rumors, not their megaphone.
- **Afterward:** Participate in local elections and community self-government. Practice democracy through the smallest public matters. A republic does not come into being through a declaration on a single day; it grows through countless homeowners' associations, village committees, and trade unions.

2. Civil Servants and Frontline Administrative Staff

For this group, the essential message is simple: do your jobs during transition as you normally do. Handle each document according to the rules, and do not voluntarily participate in persecution. Know in advance how your unit maintains continuity—who manages accounts, who controls official seals, and where records are kept. When the moment arrives, remaining at your post and continuing your duties is the highest instruction: wages, social security, household registration, and relief should continue as usual. When ordered to destroy records, transfer assets, or carry out manifestly unlawful instructions, use procedural delay and preserve records. Afterward, the law will confirm administrative continuity (political appointees serve at the government's discretion, while career civil servants remain under law). Cooperating with handovers and reporting truthfully will be this group's greatest contribution to the republic.

3. Police and Frontline Law-Enforcement Officers

Remember one boundary: the law determines whether an order is lawful, not a superior's will. Refusing a manifestly unlawful order is consistent with police ethics and widely recognized international practice.

In a period of turmoil, police priorities must change: first prevent disasters, looting, and stampedes, and protect civilians and public facilities. The mere fact of "gathering" comes last. Do not use lethal force against peaceful crowds. Stop excessive conduct by colleagues and preserve a record. A transitioning society most needs police officers it can trust. In future determinations of responsibility, those who voluntarily disclose where orders came from and preserve enforcement records should receive fair treatment. This is a promise, not a threat, and the sooner it is understood, the better.

4. Military Personnel (Officers and Soldiers)

The honor of military service lies in defending the country and its people, not any individual or political party. Understanding this is the most important preparation for military personnel. The lesson of 1911 is clear: when military loyalty becomes personal or factional, the nation has already lost half the battle.

- **During the moment:** Do not fire on civilians. Do not execute manifestly unconstitutional or unlawful orders, and express objections through the chain of command. When the situation is

unclear, remaining in barracks, maintaining order, and staying neutral constitute the greatest loyalty to the country. Every order to involve troops in a partisan conflict should prompt one question: what law authorizes it?
- **Afterward:** A national military, rather than a party army, is a foundation of the republic (Question 24, “How Should the Nationalization of the Military and the Individual Rights of Service Members Be Handled?”). The military owes allegiance to the constitution, not a party, and service members' political and civil rights must also be protected. Those who proactively return to duty, hand over their responsibilities completely, and obey the civilian government will rank among the meritorious ones of the new state.

5. Judges, Prosecutors, Lawyers, and Legal Professionals

- **Now:** Defend every inch of procedural justice. Within your authority, make every judgment capable of withstanding future review. Lawyers should continue defending even the most unpopular clients—that is evidence that the rule of law survives.
- **During the moment:** Courts and prosecutors' offices should maintain basic operations, strictly enforce statutory conditions for arrest and detention, and preserve case files.
- **Afterward:** You will implement transitional justice: rehabilitation, compensation, trials, and distinctions of responsibility (Questions 26–30, the five questions on justice, reconciliation, and institutional safeguards: “Why Does Political Transition Need a Truth Commission?”; “How Should Individual Criminal Responsibility Be Distinguished from Ordinary Civil Servants' Administrative Responsibility?”; “Why Can't Collective Revenge Replace the Rule of Law?”; “How Should Rehabilitation and Compensation for Political Prisoners Be Linked with Judicial Independence?”; and “How Can a New Government Be Prevented from Abusing Emergency Powers as Its Predecessor Did?”). Every task requires an existing legal profession. The republic's constitutional and legal continuity must begin to be rebuilt through your work on the first day.

6. Managers of State-Owned Enterprises and Public Institutions

- **Now:** Safeguard accounts and asset inventories. Do not participate in hurried transfers of assets or destruction of books. Understand your organization's public-service functions (energy, transport, communications, healthcare, education) and emergency operating procedures.
- **During the moment:** Keep services running: power grids, railways, hospitals, and schools must not shut down. For any instruction to suspend operations or transfer assets, demand written orders and preserve them.
- **Afterward:** Managers who keep public services uninterrupted will be among the professionals most urgently needed by the new system. Those who transfer assets intact will receive clear legal protection.

7. Private Entrepreneurs and the Business Community

- **Now:** Operate lawfully, treat employees well, and build reputational capital. Establish sound corporate governance: transparent accounts and compliance records protect a business under any system.
- **During the moment:** Maintain supplies and employment. Do not hoard, profiteer, or exploit a national crisis. Keeping payments and logistics operating helps prevent social collapse.
- **Afterward:** Investor confidence in the new order will come from the first companies that follow the rules. Property rights will be protected under the new constitutional order (as discussed elsewhere in this series). Businesses that keep operating and paying taxes through transition will be the starting point of the republic's public finances.

8. Intellectuals, Teachers, and Journalists

- **Now:** Preserve truthful history and professional standards. Teach students how to think, not what to think. Uphold basic academic and journalistic honesty in your fields.
- **During the moment:** Record only what can be verified. Do not create rumors or mobilize hatred

on behalf of any side. The media's first responsibility is to reassure the public that “order continues, services continue, and rules continue.”
- **Afterward:** The republic will need its own storytellers and teachers: turn transition into a shared public memory and bring constitutional education into every classroom.

9. Religious and Community Leaders

- **Now:** Maintain mutual-aid networks within communities. In disasters and upheaval, people first survive through their neighbors.
- **During the moment:** Provide shelter, mediate, and prevent fighting. Keep religious and community spaces open without turning them into mobilization centers for any side. Prevent retaliation based on religion or identity.
- **Afterward:** Reconciliation needs you. Truth, forgiveness, and living together must be worked out conversation by conversation within communities (the truth and reconciliation framework in Question 26, “Why Does Political Transition Need a Truth Commission?”).

10. Local Elites and Grassroots Governance Leaders (Village, Neighborhood, Township, and Industry Leaders)

- **Now:** Administer local public affairs as properly as possible. Places with transparent accounts and procedures face the lowest costs of transition.
- **During the moment:** Jiangsu and Zhejiang in 1911 showed that negotiated change by local elites can minimize bloodshed. Organize local consultation, maintain public security and supplies, and keep communicating with all sides. You are your locality's “receiving structure.”
- **Afterward:** Local self-government is the republic's foundation (Questions 31–35, the five questions on local autonomy and constitutional design: “Why Does China Need Genuine Local Self-Government?”; “How Should Fiscal Powers Be Divided Among the Central, Provincial, and County Governments?”; “Is Federalism Suitable for China's Future?”; “How Can Local Autonomy Be Protected Without Undermining Basic Civil Rights?”; and “Why Are Independent Courts and Local Democratic Elections Both Indispensable?”). The organizers and candidates of the first local elections after transition will likely come from your ranks.

11. Overseas Chinese and International Supporters

People overseas have neither weapons nor government offices. They do have things beyond the old order's reach: freedom of expression, international networks, funding, and professional expertise. Their first task is therefore to build a “receiving structure” overseas in advance: a program, research, legal packages (such as this movement's seven-law transition package), the public portion of a talent roster, and regular relationships with governments, parliaments, and media abroad.

- **During the moment:** Do only four things: verify information before amplifying it (overseas rumors can do the greatest harm to people inside the firewall); advocate international recognition and commitments to noninterference; organize humanitarian and professional assistance; and prepare paths for returning professionals. **Never:** remotely command actions inside the mainland, publish information identifying anyone there, or create momentum through unverified reports of “military contacts.” The lesson of Wang Bingzhang applies first and foremost to overseas movements themselves.
- **Afterward:** Bring back funding, technology, institutional experience, and international networks. Obey the new government's laws and election results rather than claiming the privileges of “founding heroes.” The overseas role is that of a midwife, not a new master.

After the Moment: A Timeline for Minimum Delay and Friction

- **First 72 hours:** Issue an administrative continuity order (career civil servants stay, services continue); prioritize public security and disaster prevention; announce amnesty for political

prisoners and prisoners of conscience; freeze asset transfers; and announce transitional principles (no revenge, protection of property rights, protection of wages).
- **First month:** Establish a transitional government and local consultation mechanisms; release all political prisoners and begin registration; announce a timetable for constitution-making and elections; and open channels for international recognition and assistance.
- **Within the first year:** Enact transitional justice framework legislation (truth, distinctions of responsibility, rehabilitation, and compensation; see Questions 26–30 on justice, reconciliation, and institutional safeguards); legislation establishing a national, nonpartisan military (Question 24); local autonomy and electoral laws (Questions 31–35 on local autonomy and constitutional design); convene a constitutional convention; and hold the first free election.
- **The key to minimizing friction:** Prepare templates first—legal packages, public notices, and handover procedures should be drafted and publicly debated before the moment. Make commitments first—protections for those who stay at their posts, hand over responsibilities, or cease fighting must be made clear in advance. Everyone who hesitates should be able to calculate beforehand that the benefits of switching are certain and the benefits of resisting are zero.

Closing Remarks

The final lesson of 1911 is that a republic was not “declared” into existence on a particular day. For years before that declaration, it had already been prepared in consultative assemblies, New Army barracks, chambers of commerce, and newspapers. Preparation means that everyone, in their own position, performs their duties to the highest standard while upholding the five principles. Those who preserve records, refuse unlawful orders, maintain professional honesty, and care for neighbors today are the ready-made citizens and officials of tomorrow's republic. When the moment arrives, the world will not start from zero; it will start from what you have already prepared.

(This guide is a public educational text and may be freely shared. Its companion analysis of indicators appears in “When Does the Window for Transition Open?”; channel discipline is addressed in the “Channel Strategy Note.” All three belong to the Free China Movement's “Research on the Republic of China (Taiwan) and Democratic Transition on the Mainland” series.)

In This Series: Three Books on Preparing for Transition

- Part One, Timing: When Does the Window for Transition Open? An Analysis of the Conditions and Indicators of Democratic Transition on the Mainland Using the “Ruling Coalition” Framework
- Part Two, Communication: Channel Strategy Note: Restore the Function of “Push,” Not the Old Machinery—Reaching Readers Behind the Firewall in the Age of Spam Filtering and Censorship
- Part Three, Action: Before, During, and After the Moment Arrives: A Guide to Action for People in Different Positions (this article)
- Reference Volume: Experiences and Lessons of European Transitions: From Roundtables to the Breakup of Yugoslavia
- Series Home: Research on the Republic of China (Taiwan) and Democratic Transition on the Mainland