

Referendum could make nation more credible

Written by Chin Heng-wei 陳恆偉
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US Republican Stephen Yates, a friend of Taiwan, is questioning the Taiwanese people's determination to become independent, but the reason is not only that the US and China are strongly opposed to the idea ("Taiwan not ready for independence," Aug. 6, page 6).

Yates reportedly said that "Taiwan is not ready" and that if Taiwanese were "willing to trade their lives, assets and sacred honor for Taiwanese independence, they would win the support of the international community."

This could be seen as a well-intended warning and the only question is whether there is any solid evidence to show that the Taiwanese "are not ready."

Not long ago, Yates visited the Presidential Office in Taipei and he also met with many politicians both from the governing and the opposition parties.

Yates' judgement, then, is based on the government's opinion, and President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) wants to "maintain the status quo," so it is not a matter of not being ready, it is a matter of not making preparations for independence at all.

From this perspective, perhaps Yates has only listened to the official position and ignored public opinion. A referendum in Taiwan would have nothing to do with the president or any political party: Everyone — the president, legislators and all 23 million Taiwanese — has one vote.

Are the Taiwanese ready? There is no way to know. Taiwan has never held an independence referendum, so how could we know?

The people have a constitutional right to hold referendums and the president or the legislature have no right to continue to ignore the issue.

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The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) spent the past 60 or 70 years making a mess of Taiwan. Is the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) now going to continue to do the same thing?

Passing the Referendum Act (公投法) amendment is a responsibility the DPP cannot shirk.

Let us also look at the two different international reactions Yates mentioned.

First, there is strong US opposition. Who is the US opposing? A referendum is the collective expression of public opinion. Are they opposing 23 million individuals?

Former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) UN referendum was initiated by the government, so the US could put pressure on the president.

This is a referendum that would be initiated by the public, and the public would vote in it and there is nothing the president or the ruling party could do to stop it, so who would the US oppose?

Then there is strong Chinese opposition. Will China be opposed? Of course it will. There is no need to wait for a referendum: It will be upset as soon as the amendment to the Referendum Act is passed. Do we Taiwanese need to worry? No.

Once the amendment has been passed, Taiwan will have one more bargaining chip when dealing with China, as it can hold an independence referendum whenever it wants. The people can also choose not to hold one and they can vote in support of it, or they can oppose it.

As China puts pressure on the nation, it must consider the reaction of Taiwanese. This is a reaction that is backed up by a whole warehouse full of gunpowder.

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During the celebrations marking the founding of China's People's Liberation Army, Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) threatened Taiwan, and the DPP's response that he was "far removed from Taiwanese public opinion" was far too lame.

With an amended Referendum Act, "Taiwanese public opinion" would not be an empty word and China would need to give serious thought to it before making threats and rattling its sabers.

Chin Heng-wei is a political commentator.

Translated by Perry Svensson

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