

Premier William Lai's (賴清德) rhetoric regarding the nation's de facto independence continued to snowball yesterday, with the pro-unification New Party urging the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to join it in taking Lai to court over an "offense of sedition."

During his first Legislative Yuan appearance as premier on Tuesday, Lai defused politically sensitive questions from KMT lawmakers regarding his stance on the independence-unification issue with a carefully calibrated response.

"We are already an independent country, the official title of which is Republic of China [ROC]," Lai said, adding that the nation does not need a separate declaration of independence.

Aside from threats of legal action, Lai's comment also attracted criticism from several pan-blue heavyweights, who accused him of jeopardizing national security and cross-strait security with his public proclamation of support for Taiwanese independence in his capacity as premier.

Is Lai's statement really that unprecedented?

Actually, it is not. Some of his fiercest critics have themselves used similar rhetoric to describe Taiwan's sovereignty status, including KMT Vice Chairman Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) and former premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜華).

After Scotland voted in a widely watched referendum to remain in the UK in September 2014, Jiang, who served as premier under then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) of the KMT, shrugged off calls for Taiwan to hold a similar plebiscite to decide its future because "the ROC is already an independent country."

Hau made a similar remark in July 2015, following Beijing's passage of a controversial security law stipulating that "safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity is the common obligation of all Chinese people, including people in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan."

Hau argued at the time that Taiwan was not similar to Hong Kong or Macau, as “the ROC is an independent country,” urging China to recognize the existence of the ROC.

In March, Ma used similar rhetoric when asked about Taiwanese independence during a public conversation in New York with his former Harvard Law School advisor Jerome Cohen.

“Have you ever heard of a country declaring independence twice? We were an independent country back in 1912 — how can I declare independence again?” Ma said at the time.

Without further context, Lai’s remarks seem no different from those made by the three KMT politicians. They all contained the same elements: “Taiwan and the ROC are mutually exchangeable names” and “it is an independent country.”

However, those who follow Taiwanese party politics closely would probably be able to detect differences in their underlying intentions.

On the one hand, Lai threw in the term “ROC” for the apparent purposes of toeing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government’s official line and casting a veil over what he truly supports, which is likely *de jure* Taiwanese independence.

On the other hand, the three KMT politicians were attempting to preserve the nation’s official title of ROC, while creating room for maneuver that allowed them to stay on Beijing’s good side and assuage the public’s growing desire for formal independence.

The independence-unification issue has for a long time been a game of words.

An obvious example is the so-called “1992 consensus,” which allegedly allows both sides of the Taiwan Strait to have their own interpretation of what “one China” means.

More independence word games

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China has cunningly avoided providing a clear definition of the “1992 consensus” to create the false impression that it is open to the idea of Taipei and Beijing having different interpretations of “one China.” However, that is nothing but a ploy to subtly bring Taiwan in line with its “one China” principle.

There is no need to make a fuss about Lai’s comments. In the cutthroat world of politics, the smart ones never give up on their desires; they simply learn how to put them into clever words.

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