

The crucial place of a democracy's referendum

Written by Yeh Chu-lan Lee Ying-yuan 葉楚蘭 李英媛

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The Cabinet's Referendum Review Committee has turned down a referendum proposal relating to the economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) that the government wants to sign with China, citing various preposterous reasons.

It is truly shameful of the government to claim that Taiwan serves as a democratic model for the rest of Asia when Taiwanese cannot express an opinion on major policies involving national development.

Rights must be protected, and so must democracy. From tomorrow, let us show our support for the campaign entitled "The people are the masters of the country" (人民是國家的主人) initiated by former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chairman Lin Yi-hsiung (林義雄). Let the people of Taiwan determine its destiny.

The democracy movement has ranged from social movements outside the established system to legislative reform within the establishment. The transfer of power in 2000 marked a milestone in the decades-long pursuit of Taiwanese consciousness.

Last year, the DPP suffered a crushing defeat in the presidential elections, which had an adverse impact on the independence movement.

A look at what President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has done over the past year shows he has acted under the influence of China, including allowing contaminated milk powder imports; opening the nation to Chinese tourists; refusing to let exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama visit Taiwan; remaining silent on the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre; banning national flags during the visit of Chinese envoy Chen Yunlin (陳雲林); arguing that Taiwanese should be able to read traditional Chinese characters and write simplified ones used in China; and refusing foreign aid in the aftermath of Typhoon Morakot.

It is worrying that Ma has taken such a pro-China approach. No wonder a worried public has started to question whether they even will be able to elect a president in 2012.

Former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) two terms in office consolidated Taiwanese consciousness. In a recent survey on the political future of Taiwan, more than 70 percent of respondents supported the "status quo" or Taiwanese independence. With Ma ignoring Taiwan's sovereignty and leaning so heavily toward China, referendums have become the only means of showing that power rests with the people.

A referendum is a form of direct democracy. Most countries put constitutional issues to a referendum, for example. Ireland held a second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Denmark and Sweden rejected joining the European Monetary Union and adopting the euro through a referendum. Even former US president Bill Clinton said a cross-strait deal must secure the agreement of Taiwanese. A referendum thus displays the strength of a country's democratic

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defenses at a global level.

A victory in the presidential election is not a blank check on policy. The referendum is the clearest manifestation of power resting with the people, and it makes up for faults in representative and indirect democracy.

The Referendum Act (公投法) is rightly ridiculed as a “bird cage referendum law” over its unreasonably high threshold for both passage and the number of signatures needed to commence the process. Even the establishment of the Referendum Review Committee was questionable.

Let us support the campaign calling on the public to be masters of their country, and in turn demand the government amend the Referendum Act. A key agreement like an ECFA must obtain public consent before it can be signed, in order to guarantee power remains with the people.

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TRANSLATED BY TED YANG

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