

Letting the public have its say on policies

Written by Hsu Yung-ming 許雲明

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The results of US-Taiwan negotiations on beef imports and the government's subsequent attitudes and actions in dealing with the matter reflect the failings of a political system characterized by one-party rule.

The government ignored the importance of the issue from the start and paid no attention to South Korea's problems after it allowed US beef to be imported again. Negotiations lasted for 17 months yet lacked communication with the legislature, opposition parties and civic organizations. The government was so arrogant that it did not even consult experts on mad cow disease.

Comments made by senior officials after the protocol was released were surprising. Department of Health Minister Yaung Chih-liang (楊志良) made contradictory statements. Even the most fundamental food safety regulations were compromised.

In the end, Yaung cited a set of administrative control measures to gloss over the dissatisfaction of 80 percent of the public. National Security Council (NSC) Secretary-General Su Chi (蘇起) was unwilling to shoulder responsibility, saying only that the trade protocol would take precedence over the law. Yet the legislature would not review the protocol, making one wonder whether the NSC overrides the legislature.

The premier, meanwhile, acted as if the matter were none of his business and dismissed calls for a referendum as "populism."

More importantly, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has yet to make a complete statement to explain the focus of the beef negotiations and what his position was. He cannot divert attention by saying that he supports boycotts by local governments.

If negotiations on US beef were conducted in such a slapdash manner, who knows what under-the-table deals will be struck in the future "era of negotiations" that Su speaks of.

Even more worrying is the risk that Taiwan's democracy will become dysfunctional and fail if negotiations with other countries are used to redistribute domestic interests without being monitored by the public and the legislature.

The public should stop dismissing the referendums proposed by civic organizations such as the Consumers' Foundation, while the Referendum Review Committee should stop acting on behalf of the Cabinet to block a referendum.

Most people don't think a referendum initiated by the public for its own well-being would be successful because of the high threshold required for passage. However, the recent gambling referendum in Penghu shows that even in an atmosphere where there is little confidence that the public can make decisions, things can change when citizens are given a chance to have

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their say.

The People's Sovereignty Movement began a protest on Saturday. Now that Ma is in charge of both the government and the ruling party and is negotiating with other countries to restructure Taiwan's economic and political environment, campaigns like the People's Sovereignty Movement are probably the only way to resist the government apart from elections.

A presidential election every four years is not enough to change things. Four years is a long time, and if we look at Taiwan's turbulent history, it is easy to see how improvement or failure can be decided in an instant.

This is where the significance of referendums becomes apparent — the only way to correct the government's ineptitude is to uphold democracy and hold referendums to let the public be masters of the country.

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□ TRANSLATED BY DREW CAMERON

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