

A new setting for independence

Written by Chris Huang 黃子明

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The failure of the referendum for Taiwan to apply to participate at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games under the name “Taiwan” stunned its supporters into silence, while some media talk about the demise of radical independence forces.

It might be true that losers should refrain from talking too loudly, but the referendum result implies an unprecedented generational shift among independence advocates, and they are still trying to absorb the impact of the shock.

Those who initiated the referendum say that it was not a push for independence, while those who opposed it say they were afraid that possible International Olympic Committee (IOC) sanctions would negatively affect the rights and interests of athletes. Both sides are blowing hot air.

The IOC charter stipulates that a national Olympic committee must represent a country. Without independence, how would it be possible to change from “Chinese Taipei” to “Taiwan”? The Lausanne Agreement stipulates no penalties and IOC practice shows that even the most extreme political interference would not see a whole delegation banned, so in what way would athletes’ rights and interests have been hurt?

Both sides have ulterior motives, and the referendum was the first open battle between pro and anti-independence forces.

Why the first public battle? Because past engagements between pro-unification and pro-independence camps have at most been fought over telephone opinion polls. How representative can a sample of just over 1,000 respondents really be? In anonymous surveys, everyone would happily answer “yes” when asked if they would fight for independence, but what has happened in presidential elections when representatives of the pan-green and pan-blue camps have faced off? Regardless of whether Taiwanese have voted green or blue, all they have gotten is a leader of “Chinese Taipei,” while independence is gone with the wind.

However, the Olympics referendum was different. To get 430,000 people to sign a referendum proposal, independence advocates for the first time set out on an eight-month nationwide

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campaign. Each signature represented at least seven minutes of debate in the street to explain the highly challenging issue of correcting the nation's name. Five weeks of televised referendum debates for the first time gave independence advocates 150 minutes to promote their views on public television. When the smoke settled, 10 million people had participated in the final battle.

This public battle also had a huge effect on traditional independence advocates. A referendum measures voter support, not decibels, so gaining voter support means hitting the streets, schools and TV stations to promote the issue.

Independence must move on from theory to implementation. Past theories that leaders of factions debated until they were red in the face included the idea that Taiwan's status was undetermined; the issue of government succession and the status of the governments on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait; the view that Taiwan is occupied; evolving independence; and self-determination and nation building. Today, young referendum volunteers have pragmatically transformed these issues into everyday language that they use to share their ideas. The requirements of a new age have fused these ideas into tangible values. Because independence awareness was focused on the Olympics issue, it has become secularized and real. Concomitant with this change, independence advocates have become younger and their image more diverse.

The referendum was also the first test to show the number of people willing to shoulder the cost of independence. The other referendums were restricted by laws and regulations, but the political effects of the Olympics referendum could have been the announcement of independence and a military attack by China. This would be directly shouldered by Taiwanese.

Despite this, 4.76 million people made it clear that they were ready to accept the possible consequences, which proves that the legitimacy of independence outweighs that of the "Chinese Taipei" Constitution. The referendum outcome tells independence advocates that they should give up forbearance and politeness, and begin to openly talk about independence at any time and in any place.

The referendum also showed that independence does not necessarily require the support of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). For many years, independence has been used by the DPP as a cure-all when it needed to mobilize support. However, this time the party coldly refused to be the savior of independence. Not only did it refuse to participate in signature

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collecting, it even stooped to becoming a lackey, supporting participation at the Tokyo Olympics using “Chinese Taipei.”

Still, the DPP’s pointed boycott did not harm hardcore support for independence, but from now on, they must stop relying on a DPP government to help them realize their dream of nation building. Not only that, they must seriously consider how to maintain a strategic competitive relationship with the DPP.

Although the referendum failed, it was a thorough soul-cleansing for independence advocates. Taiwanese independence is no longer a jurisprudential undertaking for those who on paper make up the elite, nor is it a placebo for high-profile political victims: It has been distilled to the universal value of choice for street activists.

The betrayal by one-time allies in the referendum process also explains why the political machinery must, and can do nothing but serve this choice.

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Translated by Perry Svensson

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