

The DPP and the crisis of democracy in Taiwan

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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The opposition Democratic Progressive Party faces a major crossroads Sunday when delegates to a party congress will select a new party leadership and officially launch its campaign for the Nov. 27 special municipality mayoral elections.

After leading her party out of the morass of debacle in back to back legislative and presidential elections in early 2008 and scoring major gains in city and county mayoral polls and a series of wins in legislative by-elections, DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen was re-elected in an landslide May 24.

Party delegates elected the same day will select a new 30-member Central Executive Committee, who will in turn choose 10 members of the DPP's 15 member Central Standing Committee that will guide the DPP during two critical years that may decide whether Taiwan remains a democratic independent state.

The DPP congress will set the theme for November's mayoral elections in Taipei City, Sinbei City, Taichung City, Tainan City and Kaohsiung City, polls which now bear significance beyond their urban borders in the context of the crisis of Taiwan's democracy and sovereignty triggered by the China-centric and excessively pro-big business policies adopted by the rightist Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) administration of President Ma Ying-jeou and its instinctive restoration of authoritarian practices.

DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen raised the rhetorical stakes Wednesday when she declared that "the current government has already become a neo-authoritarian regime that wears the robes of popular election."

Tsai cited the KMT's "hollowing out" of the constitutional power of review by the Legislative Yuan of the controversial "Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement" with the Chinese Communist Party - ruled People's Republic of China and the "bulldozing" of opposition to other "fixed government policies" such as the eighth naphtha cracker and forced takeovers of farmland heedless of environmental protection, citizen rights or procedural or social justice.

The question which the Taiwan people need answering is what can they and the DPP do to

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ensure the protection of Taiwan's hard-won democracy and autonomy from KMT-CCP "co-rule."

The answer does not lie in displays like last Thursday's brawl with KMT legislators and the subsequent and equally futile boycott of the rest of the special Legislative session as such actions will both undermine the DPP's image of competence and principle among middle voters and erode confidence in its political wisdom among its supporters.

Only consistent, resolute and progressive tactics and a clear general strategy will generate greater confidence in the leadership of Taiwan's major grassroots party and restore self-confidence among the majority of Taiwan people in their capability to influence Taiwan's future direction and the shape of our society.

Instead of allowing the KMT to shape its options based on its authoritarian logic, the DPP must act according to its own democratic and progressive logic and based on its responsibilities to the Taiwan people.

Instead of being mired in empty gestures or futile boycotts, the DPP must set an example for an engaged resistance to the KMT government's neo-authoritarian devolution through creative political action that follows the principle of "living in truth" advocated by former Czech president and human rights activist Vaclav Havel and do what needs doing and say what is true and needs saying.

Moreover, the congress should send a clear message that neither the DPP or Taiwan's people can afford petty ambitions among disappointed politicians or renewed feuding among fading "stars" in the run-up to the November polls as they concern not simply the future of individual politicians but Taiwan's very existence as a democratic state.

The second time around

Instead, the DPP needs to devote its energies to building itself into a progressive and forward-looking political party that can inspire confidence at home and abroad in its capabilities

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in local and national governance and has a positive and feasible vision on how to achieve the comprehensive well-being of the Taiwan people.

The DPP also has the responsibility to make clear to Taiwan's citizens the gravity and breadth of Taiwan's current crisis and, through a new 10-year programmatic vision, offer a persuasive alternative strategy for Taiwan's economic future amidst the challenges of economic and financial globalization, the onslaught of world climate change and the pressure from authoritarian PRC.

Moreover, the DPP must convince the world democratic community that it has the competence, maturity, resolve and wisdom to deal with Taiwan's delicate relations with the PRC and that the cultivation of peace with justice that preserves Taiwan's democracy and autonomy will be more lasting than the KMT's craven "reconciliation" with its former authoritarian rival at the cost of Taiwan's democracy, economic prosperity and social justice.

Last but not least, the DPP leadership and citizens who desire the return of Taiwan - centric and truly democratic and progressive governance should take heart and recall that the Taiwan people already achieved an even more daunting historical accomplishment with the ousting of the previous KMT authoritarian regime through the "quiet revolution" of democratization.

If we could do it once, we can do it again.

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