

Yesterday's consensus among all parties in the Legislative Yuan to rapidly approve a legal ban on the importation of beef products with especially high risk of contamination of "mad cow disease" sent an important message to President Ma Ying-jeou's Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) government and decision-makers in Washington and Beijing that voices of the Taiwan people cannot be ignored.

The signing of a bilateral protocol between the KMT government and U.S. last month that mandated the lifting of Taiwan's existing ban on imports of bone-in beef, intestines and ground beef from the U.S. sparked a storm of protest from all sectors of Taiwan society, including lawmakers from all parties, consumer protection groups, several KMT and DPP mayors and thousands of individual citizens.

KMT government officials have insisted that the health of the Taiwan people was not sacrificed or compromised by the protocol which they describe as being tougher than a similar agreement reached between the U.S. and South Korea.

However, Taiwan consumer protection groups and most citizens believe that the only guaranteed protection is simply not to import high risk beef products from the U.S., as shown by the fact that over 72 percent of 901 Taiwan citizens polled by the DPP Public Survey Center opposed the decision to expand the range of imported U.S. beef and nearly 82 percent want the protocol to be renegotiated.

The promulgation of the market opening Monday evening together with the announcement of Cabinet plans to adopt various technical measures, such as demanding the defrosting of ground beef for inspection or denying import permits, to technically obstruct the full opening of the Taiwan market to U.S. beef was greeted with considerable scepticism.

Such scepticism is fully justified since it would be difficult for the KMT government to explain to Washington why it was obstructing a newly signed market - opening agreement.

President Ma, National Security Council Secretary-General Su Chi and Foreign Minister Timothy Yang Chin-tien have declared that re-negotiation of the protocol would undermine the

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international credibility of the Taiwan government to abide by its promises.

However, what this flap "undermines" is the KMT government's claim of "competence" and its almost total lack of democratic transparency and accountability.

The KMT leadership assumed that last year's landslide electoral victories, in which the KMT won back control over the presidency with a three-quarters legislative majority, allowed a return to its past standard operating procedures of "black-box" decision-making without the need for multi-party consultations or citizen dialogue.

The people's voices

The beef protocol is by no means the first example of the dangers of such bureaucratic hubris but this time an intensity popular outcry combined with Ma's plunging popularity and the approach of important city and county mayoral elections December 5 to form a potential political crisis.

In the face of plans by civic reform and social movement for a referendum petition campaign on the U.S.-Taiwan protocol and the spectre of an electoral blowback, the KMT caved into a day-long boycott by DPP lawmakers and substantively agreed to support the opposition party's proposal to revise the Food and Health Regulation Law's Article 11 to ban the importation of high risk beef products from countries which have been declared to be BSE - infected or which have reported outbreaks of BSE infections.

Besides announcing the consensus to approve the proposed revisions by Nov. 17, Legislative Yuan President Wang Jin-pyng called on the Cabinet to keep the door closed to such imports until the new revisions were approved.

The spotlight will now be shifted back to the KMT to see whether the ruling party will use its nearly three-fourths legislative majority to approve the revisions in the face of anticipated pressure from the U.S. on the Taiwan government to fully implement the protocol it just signed with Washington.

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Besides welcoming the KMT government's announcement of the protocol to "fully open its market to American beef and beef products" Monday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Trade Representative Office issued a veiled warning to the Taiwan government not to subvert the protocol by stating that Washington is "currently reviewing" the Cabinet's "additional domestic measures" in order "to ensure they allow Taiwan consumers the opportunity to enjoy the same safe American beef and beef products that American families eat."

The problem is that many Taiwan consumers do not dare to "enjoy" such products because they lack confidence that they are indeed "safe," concerns which received a timely boost by news reports of two deaths in the U.S. linked to the consumption of fresh ground beef believed to be contaminated by E. coli bacteria.

The exposure of the vulnerability of the KMT government to popular anger could not have come at a better time since the Ma government is now preparing to begin talks with the People's Republic of China on an "economic cooperation framework agreement" which poses a far greater threat to the livelihood and security of the Taiwan people.

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