

Aborigine advocates quarrel over law

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Younger Aboriginal rights protesters yesterday argued with government officials and older campaigners over how to grant official recognition to Pingpu Aborigines at the final Council of Indigenous Peoples consultative forum.

“Pingpu” is a general term used for Aborigines originally living in lowland areas and who were considered more “assimilated” than Aborigines who lived in mountainous areas or the east coast during Japanese colonial rule.

Yesterday’s forum at the New Taipei City Hall for residents of several northern localities was attended by a handful of younger rights advocates from central and southern regions, who expressed opposition to the council’s proposal to amend the Status Act For Indigenous Peoples (原住民族法) to include a separate entry for members of “plains tribes” instead of including them under the umbrella of “lowland” tribes.

“There can be a buffer period before we receive full rights, but our hope is that we are given recognition as ‘lowland’ Aborigines rather than grouped as ‘plains,’” said Hsu Ming-chun (許銘春), a Kaohsiung member of the plains Taivoan people. “The rights of Pingpu should be clearly outlined, rather than simply passing an amendment which only recognizes our identity.”

The Status Act recognizes “lowland” and “mountain” Aborigines, who were registered during the first two decades of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) rule based on a combination of local residency and recognition under Japanese colonial rule.

According to the council, Aborigines residing in “mountain” tribal residency areas were automatically registered, but those in “lowland” regions were required to register themselves.

Many members of previously recognized “assimilated Aboriginal” tribes lost their official status after failing to register as members of “lowland” tribes within the application window, the council said.

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The draft amendment would allow people who can prove direct descent from people registered as “assimilated Aborigines” during the Japanese colonial period to register as “plains Aborigines.”

Central Pingpu Youth Alliance members handed out a statement saying that the final number of plains Aborigines who registered could be far lower than official government estimates based on the experience of local governments, reducing the potential electoral impact of granting voting rights.

While the council has estimated that Pingtung County is home to 45,000 plains Aborigines, an investigation by the local government found only 18,000, of which only 1,800 have registered since it began accepting applications in September last year, the group said.

There were only 260,631 registered lowland Aborigines as of May, according to council statistics, while estimates of the number of plains Aborigines range widely, with concerns that their inclusion could sway “lowland” elections.

In response, forum chairperson and Minister Without Portfolio Lin Wan-i (林萬益), who is responsible for the legislation, urged activists to be “more pragmatic.”

“We should not give up this opportunity [to win official recognition], because there is no way of knowing when another will arise,” he said, promising to push for equal education and cultural treatment of plains Aborigines, even as voting rights are put on hold because of the difficulty of winning passage for a constitutional amendment.

Constitutional language reserves quotas of legislators for both lowland and mountain Aborigines.

“Our draft legislation would include ‘plains’ tribes within constitutional promises to protect and support the education and culture of all Aboriginal tribes,” he said, drawing applause from older attendees.

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“People should discern the difference and support the Executive Yuan’s version. I am not happy either, but we have already waited long enough [to win official recognition],” said Lin Sheng-yi (林勝義), a Ketagalan activist, who is in his 70s.

“Members of ‘lowland’ tribes have used the ‘lowland’ designation for decades and its definition already contains a kind of social consensus. We would need to spend a long time holding discussions with members of lowland tribes before we could change it,” said Chen Jin-wan (陳金萬), another older activist who serves as a Ketagalan representative to the Taipei City Government’s Indigenous Peoples Commission.

“The main controversy is over voting rights and we should not delay taking advantage of the opportunity to rebuild our culture over that issue,” Chen said.

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