

## Coalition concerned over referendum changes

Written by Taipei Times  
Friday, 18 January 2019 04:53 -

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From left, Animal Protection Administration Oversight Committee convener Wang Wei-chi, Taiwan Alliance for Animal Rights Policy executive director Ho Tsung-hsun, Aletheia University associate professor of law Wu Ching-chin and Negative Vote Association president Sam Chang express concerns over proposed changes to the Referendum Act at a news conference in Taipei yesterday.

**Photo: Chu Pei-hsiung, Taipei Times**

A coalition of civil groups yesterday expressed concern that the Central Election Commission's proposed changes to the Referendum Act (公投法) could restrict people's rights and result in "a step backward for democracy."

While they do agree with a number of changes the commission proposed last month, more could turn the law back to the "bird cage act" it once was, they told a Taipei news conference.

Before the legislature in December 2017 passed amendments to lower the legal voting age and the thresholds for initiating, seconding and passing referendums, the act was widely mocked as a "bird cage" act due to its tight restrictions.

However, the amendments led to a number of execution difficulties during the Nov. 24 referendums, held on the same day as the nine-in-one elections, prompting the commission to consider more amendments.

The commission's proposal to introduce more flexibility for determining referendum dates could lower the turnout rate for referendums, Animal Protection Administration Oversight Committee convener Wang Wei-chi (王偉志) said.

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His group is “strongly opposed” to amending the law to allow holding referendums and elections on separate days whenever the commission considers that necessary, he said.

Wang is also opposed to the commission’s plan to require referendum initiators to collect hard copies of people’s identification cards in addition to signatures, saying it could make people less willing to support a proposal due to privacy concerns.

The public could also be less interested in participating in referendums if the commission limited a referendum question to 30 Chinese characters, he said.

“Many already find referendum questions difficult to understand. Adding a 30-character limit would make them even more difficult,” he said.

He agrees with the commission that a referendum proposal should undergo a longer wait period before the public can vote on it, but while the commission proposed holding the referendum three to six months after it is approved, he suggested holding it five to 12 months after the approval to allow more time for consideration and preparation.

Aletheia University associate professor of law Wu Ching-chin (吳景欽) said he is opposed to the commission’s plan to ban referendum questions on human rights, because it could grant the commission more power to sanction referendum topics.

“Human rights as a concept is very abstract and can take many different forms. In fact, almost all referendums held last year were related to human rights,” he said.

Banning anything related to human rights would be a step backward, he added.

To protect human rights, the government should enhance mechanisms for victims of unfair referendums to seek justice through the Council of Grand Justices, he said.

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However, he agrees with the commission's plan to ban campaigns on referendums on the day they are held, he said.

Under the current act, referendum campaigns can be held on the day of referendums as long as they are at least 30m away from polling stations, "but 30m is not that far and that could allow referendum initiators with more resources to influence the results," he said.

In addition to the commission's proposal, a number of Democratic Progressive Party legislators have put forward draft amendments to the act, Wang said, urging legislators to "watch out for traps" set by the commission to undercut progress in democracy.

Source: [Taipei Times - 2019/01/18](#)