

There's still no transparency

Written by Taipei Times
Saturday, 11 July 2009 12:42

Since the first round of cross-strait talks under the Ma Ying-jeou presidency last year, the pace of developments in the Taiwan Strait has some unnerved, and others — mostly those eyeing investment opportunities — delighted.

Were the government's high-speed pursuit of economic opportunity rooted in democratic processes, there would be less room for criticism. But cross-strait reforms — regardless of their potential effect on Taiwan's independence and the livelihoods of Taiwanese — are being decided behind closed doors, and with no public or legislative oversight.

This has been the case across the board, from the inking of far-reaching deals between the Straits Exchange Foundation and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait to the unclear terms of Taiwan's inclusion in the WHO's International Health Regulations and its participation at the World Health Assembly.

The lack of transparency amounts to a repudiation of democratic principles.

But this is the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) legacy, and the KMT's creation of a communication channel with the Chinese Communist Party in 2005 is a case in point. The platform, formed under the guidance of former KMT chairman Lien Chan, typifies the party's tactics and was a sign of things to come.

The potential for party-to-party talks to conflict with and undermine the goals and dignity of the government did not concern the KMT; seeking workable ties with its one-time foe was paramount.

Now, the KMT is hoping to cast a democracy-friendly veneer onto a platform that was close to treacherous during the party's time in opposition. To this end, the KMT has urged the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to participate in this weekend's cross-strait forum in Hunan.

But with the exception of former DPP legislator Hsu Jung-shu, the DPP isn't biting. And now that the party has instituted a ban on attending the forum, Hsu faces censure and potential penalties if she attends.

A former Council of Agriculture minister, Fan Chen-tzung, has also accepted the KMT's invitation, but having left the DPP and supported the KMT in the past two presidential elections, his decision was not a shock.

That even one member of the DPP would accept an invitation bodes ill for a party that professes to seek greater transparency and supervision of cross-strait developments. For this reason, the DPP ban against members participating was a necessary signal.

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Faced with friction within the KMT, Ma has no doubt had his own concerns about the forum. But while the president may have more confidence in such meetings as he prepares to take the helm of the KMT, the party-to-party platform remains a channel outside any democratic oversight framework.

Cross-strait policy “will not have enough strength and representation if only the KMT is participating in [its] establishment,” Ma has said.

His words sum up a problem that has plagued cross-strait affairs since he took office and which he has a responsibility to mend. But given that Ma thinks these forums are an appropriate location for the government’s cross-strait policies to take shape, the chance of change is unrealistic.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2009/07/11](#)