

Discontent rising among Taiwanese

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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From the general mood on Saturday, it was hard to imagine that the 100,000 people who protested in downtown Taipei were mobilizing against a policy that, as they interpret it, is a matter of life and death for themselves and — judging by the large number of babies and children — their descendants.

What with the laughter, gaudy costumes, soap bubbles, incessant picture-taking and lively songs, one would think one had chanced upon a festival of some sort, not a rally against an ill-understood form of energy that, in the wake of the nuclear incident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi power plant in Japan in March 2011, fuels people's fears of the terrible consequences should a catastrophe occur at one of the nation's three operational plants.

The same could be said about other, large protests held in recent months, such as those targeting the risks of monopolization of the nation's media.

Festive mood notwithstanding, the issues that have catalyzed protesters are no laughing matter. If we factor in the several, smaller protests held over the past four years, it becomes clear that the general mood that has descended upon Taiwanese is far more somber.

Not a week passes nowadays without a public protest being held, with issues ranging from nuclear energy to laid-off workers, state-sanctioned land seizures to the risks of Chinese influence in the local media. The frequency of the protests alone is cause for worry, as it highlights a serious disconnect between the public and the government, and the latter's inability, or unwillingness, to resolve the issues.

While the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has largely succeeded over the years in weathering large-scale protests organized by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and other parties in the pan-green camp, such as the "Fury" (憤怒) rally held earlier this year, other protests increasingly involve far more diverse groups of people and many more young people. Additionally, the new protesters have tended to dissociate themselves from the green camp, and on some issues, such as nuclear energy, many are (or were) Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) supporters.

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Consequently, while DPP rallies, however large, constituted for the Ma administration a relatively cost-free expression of discontent in terms of their impact on local and national elections, the great majority of protesters tended to be elderly and from the green camp, the KMT cannot afford to ignore the potential ramifications of the new wave of protests, as failure to address those grievances can directly translate into lost votes for the blue camp.

“I voted for the KMT last year, but I’m not sure I’ll vote for them again if they continue to ignore my voice,” was a common refrain on Saturday.

In many ways, the new protesters are not only sending a strong message of anger at the Ma administration; they are also clearly articulating the issues that matter to them and which the DPP, if it ever wants to recapture the Presidential Office, must pay attention to — not by cynically exploiting those for political gain, but by seriously providing viable alternatives that will have a real impact on people’s livelihoods.

The birthday party-like atmosphere might not last for much longer. That young people, long accused of being lethargic and uninterested in political issues, are now mobilizing, launching sit-ins and, at times, risking arrest, is a sign of a growing malaise within Taiwanese society. The longer the Ma administration continues to ignore their voices, the darker will the mood become.

So far, Taiwanese have been uncannily peaceful, and almost unnaturally patient with government officials, in their protests. That could change.

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