

Scheming behind closed doors

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Tuesday, 04 June 2013 09:17

When the legislature decided in 2004 to cut the number of legislative seats from 225 to 113, it wasted a great deal of taxpayers' money. It could have just kept the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), Democratic Progressive Party, Taiwan Solidarity Union and People First Party caucus whips, the legislative speaker and the deputy legislative speaker. That is because these six people are all you need they are the ones who participate in caucus negotiations, and they are the ones who decide what counts. All the other legislators are only there to give moral support and to pass the laws this select group has agreed should be passed.

The Cabinet is built on a simple principle. If the opinions of legislators from the different political camps differ during the regular legislative session, those who oppose the matter at hand will block the legislative agenda and bring the legislature to a standstill. The law in question will be subjected to caucus negotiations, which will freeze any progress for about a month. To improve their bargaining position, the opposing party or parties will hold the bill hostage to a raft of other issues that they want passed, which means that in the end, most proposals never make it through the legislature and pile up to the last day of the legislative session.

On that day, it will be impossible to pass this pile of bills and amendments, and most legislators will sit around waiting for the outcome of the caucus negotiations that will decide how effective this session has been. After the caucus whips have struck their deals behind closed doors, the dozen or so laws and amendments deemed most important will be bundled together, and while the other legislators try to find out which bills will be passed, the speaker strikes the gavel for the third reading and thanks everyone for a job well done.

This process may be faulty, but it is still how every legislative session ends.

The latest session was no different, except for the fact that it created a lot of trouble. On Friday, the legislature passed a controversial amendment to the Accounting Act (會計法), Article 99-1. The amendment decriminalizes the act of including false receipts when academics submit their research expense accounts, and in one fell swoop clears hundreds of academics of corruption charges in connection with past research expense accounts. The amendment also means that the use of public funds at hostess bars would be decriminalized, an offense for which former legislator and deputy Taichung County Council speaker Yen Ching-piao (顏清標) is currently in jail.

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No one knows if the caucus whips struck this deal to avert an academic crisis or if it was to get Yen off the hook. However, judging by how there was no news about this amendment until almost midnight on the last day of the session, when it was included second to last among a large number of laws and amendments and quietly snuck through the legislative review, it seems that it was not a move intended to solve a crisis in academic circles. It is more likely that it was a matter of favors and political interests and an attempt to get Yen out of jail.

The passing of the amendment has set off a storm of protests from across society criticizing the legislators in charge of the negotiations for engaging in closed-door politics. However, if the negotiators are the main culprits, the other legislators are accomplices. If this amendment is designed to get Yen off the hook, the president should not promulgate it and instead the legislature should propose a new amendment that is acceptable to the public.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/06/04](#)