

Cross-strait pact is 'policy ambush'

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Some people make decisions based on their gut, while others spend time to consider the gains and losses before taking a shot. Politicians are no different: Some initiate policies according to instinct, while others seek hard facts and analyze the details before making up their minds.

Regarding the just-signed cross-Taiwan Strait service trade pact, it seems that President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) government has denied Taiwanese a full understanding of the contents of the agreement, expecting them to just go with the government's instinct toward opening the domestic market.

Under the service trade pact, 64 Taiwanese industries will be opened to Chinese investment, covering e-commerce, transportation, finance, medical care, nursing, theater, funeral planning, beauty parlors and car leasing, while China will open up 80 industries to Taiwan in return.

Despite the large scope, covering many industries, the government has not permitted the public knowledge of any details in advance. The government has neither informed the affected industries about the potential impact nor invited them to offer their input.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) policymakers not only kept a distance from opposition parties regarding the trade pact, but even kept it secret from high-ranking members of their own party, including Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平).

On Friday in his personal blog, national policy adviser and publisher Rex How (何瑞雄) — who supported Ma in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections — strongly criticized the government over the trade pact for “overlooking the sensitivity in cross-strait issues,” “black-box operation” in policymaking, “ignorance and stupidity about China,” “arrogant attitudes toward local industries’ needs” and “lacking any sympathy for Taiwan’s small and medium-sized businesses.”

How also said it clearly showed the “chaotic decisionmaking process and inappropriate practices of the government regarding its cross-strait policies.”

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Ma's government can do better than this.

Policymakers should make the case for further trade normalization with China by explaining to the public why the cross-strait service trade pact is a good idea and how its impacts on domestic service industries will be managed.

This way they can address concerns raised by opposition parties and various local industries, such as which industries would face the most harm and what government measures will be in place before implementation.

This is simply the kind of basic information that should have been provided for public discussion prior to signing the trade pact.

Ma's government says it listened to public dissatisfaction after its policy U-turns on fuel and electricity prices, in the capital gains tax revision, in the controversial amendment to the Accounting Act (會計法) and in the proposed 12-year education program.

Yet public dismay continues because this government has developed a tendency to push forward major policies through "policy ambush," by blind-siding opposition parties and the public.

The service trade pact is yet another example of the government's modus operandi. However, this time it is Taiwan's small and medium businesses that will suffer.

The government has warned of economic difficulties if the domestic market is not liberalized, yet the question is whether the service trade agreement is a good deal for the nation, or more a concession to big business made on a policymaker's hunch.

Until the government makes an effort to communicate with the public, the legislature should hold off on giving the green light to the cross-strait service trade agreement. A policy without any transparency is one lacking credibility. Hence there should be no rush to execute it before it has been substantiated.

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