

The rise of people power

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Some people believe the Republic of China is in a pre-revolutionary state. Although many scoff at this idea, saying that the nation's democracy is in a good place, with a stable society and functioning economy, they may have to re-evaluate their position after Saturday, when more than 200,000 people descended upon Taipei's Ketagalan Boulevard to protest the death of army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘).

These protesters were not mobilized by advertisements in newspapers or on TV, and no political party was behind the demonstration. It was a relatively unknown activist group called Citizen 1985 that organized the white T-shirt vigil for Hung in front of the Presidential Office and managed to get hundreds of thousands of people to attend. The demonstrators sat in the street in an orderly manner and dispersed calmly once the event was over, having expressed their dissatisfaction with the authorities and those responsible for Hung's death.

The silver cross that the protesters formed on the intersection at the East Gate at the base of the boulevard symbolized that mass movements are now at an important turning point and that the demonstration could have a huge impact on society.

In the past, significant mass movements were instigated by political parties, but this time, the demonstration was organized by a group of young people who prefer to maintain a low profile. All that opposition party leaders did was to sit down and listen to young people speak, reflecting the waning importance of political parties in orchestrating social movements.

In the past, it was always political figures who led the public onto the streets, but now average people with no expressed political affiliation are starting to raise their voices. Famous directors and actors, such as Giddens Ko (柯俊雄), Leon Dai (戴立忍) and Ko I-chen (柯一麟), have taken the lead in several recent protests against the forced demolitions of the Wenlin Yuan (文林苑) urban renewal project, the construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City's (新北市) Gongliao District (公寮) and the demolitions of four homes in Miaoli County's Dapu Borough (大埔).

Citizens are increasingly crowding out politicians in social initiatives. "People power" is on the rise and individuals are asserting themselves, from the daughter of fisherman Hung Shih-cheng (洪世成) to Hung Chung-chiu's sister, whose succinct responses have put the gabbling, self-important TV anchors interviewing them to shame.

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The way in which Jang Show-ling (張秀蓮), chairperson of the National Taiwan University economics department, challenged the cross-strait service trade pact, applying pressure on President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) was even more remarkable, especially in contrast to the stances taken by her colleagues.

The traditional mass media is slowly losing its monopoly on the ability to mobilize the public and is being replaced by the Internet.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government may still be complacent about the situation, thinking society is stable, but it would do so well to remember that the protests in Turkey were sparked by a simple park redevelopment plan, or that the recent rioting in Brazil was ignited by bus fare increases.

Deaf to what the public tries to tell it and abusing its power, the Ma administration has angered people over development projects like those in Dapu and Wenlin Yuan.

Blind to the people struggling to make ends meet, it forced through the signing of the service trade pact.

Indifferent to people's health and safety, it insists on getting the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant operational, even though the facility has already failed many safety checks.

If the government does not see the error of its ways, listen to the public and amend its policies, the government could have a revolution on its hands.

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