

The people taking back the future

Written by Liberty Times Editorial
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Over the past few weeks, a number of protests and even clashes have broken out in various cities and towns around Taiwan. Last week, as a second extra legislative session got underway, every day saw protesters gathering in front of the Legislative Yuan and trying to push their way through the gates. Students rallying around the call to “take back the future” have been taking the place of the usual familiar faces. These youngsters are bringing new blood to street protest movements in this country.

Taiwan’s political system has gone through two peaceful transfers of presidential power. One would expect the nation to have completed its democratic consolidation, so the outbreak of protests should not be seen as normal. As social discontent reaches boiling point and people take action to say “no” to those in power, many observers will probably be asking whether such protests are of any use, and whether they can bring about any change in the existing state of affairs.

This question should be seen on two levels:

The first point to ponder is how a democratically elected government should regard such expressions of popular opinion.

The second is whether civic forces have plans about what to do when those in power react in an arrogant way.

With regard to the first point, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), now serving his second term in office, rashly claims that a distinguished academic’s objections to the cross-strait service trade agreement can be demolished with one stroke. He has called the debate about the service trade pact “a conflict between those who create rumors and those who seek to refute them.”

Meanwhile, the Presidential Office has announced that Ma will visit other countries this month, showing how completely insensitive he is to the tangle of domestic issues facing the nation.

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These facts make the answer to the first point crystal clear, so the emphasis must shift to the second point. When a dictator refuses to change his authoritarian ways, is there any way for people to solve the problem?

Why isn't Ma listening? Two incidents from the past may cast some light on his attitude.

The first incident is what happened when the World Health Assembly (WHA) held its annual session in Geneva in 2003, and Taiwan, which was suffering the greatest impact from the spread of SARS from China, asked to join the assembly. China's permanent representative to the UN, Sha Zukang (沙苏), reacted to Taiwanese reporters' questions by asking: "Who is listening to you?"

He could say such a thing because Taiwan had not joined the international establishment, and countries that were part of the establishment accepted China's demand that they vote against Taiwan's participation.

The second incident took place when former president Lee Teng-hui (李登辉) was in office, when the Constitution was amended six times and a certain newspaper ran a long series of editorials lambasting these constitutional changes. When one of Lee's advisers asked him about it, Lee said there was nothing to worry about, because the media would not be the ones raising their hands when it came to a vote.

Lee's remark shows how convenient it was for the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to maintain majority control in the now disbanded National Assembly, as it still does in the Legislative Yuan.

By the same logic, considering Ma's disdain for votes, appealing to him on the basis of any kind of value is sure to fail. This is a thoroughly realistic and rational conclusion, and it means that the only way to get Ma to bow down to the will of the public is by dismantling his power structure.

Ma's trilogy of power is very simple. He was lost for words and even sobbed when he was

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re-elected as chairman of the KMT, with the support of Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌), New Taipei City (新北市) Mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫) and Greater Taichung Mayor Jason Hu (胡志強). His hold on the party chairmanship allows him to maintain control over Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平), now a legislator-at-large, and 65 KMT legislators. It also empowers his government to push through motions such as the proposal for a referendum on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Gongliao (公寮) District, New Taipei City, and approval of the service trade agreement, and to vote down any proposal to impeach him.

With the support of his accomplices in the establishment, Ma can respond to any civil resistance by mobilizing the police and judiciary to suppress and exclude people who resist. This has already happened. However angry protesters may be, and no matter how many people go down with cuts and bruises, their actions are like firework displays — spectacular while they last, but soon disappearing without trace. For all the noise protesters may make, every article of every motion proposed by the government is sure to get passed into law.

This is the same situation that gave Ma's regime the confidence to spread rumors about the dean of a university economics department, naming the individual concerned, and to unleash KMT followers to paint opponents in all lines of business as supporters of the opposition pan-green camp. It may also explain why the charges listed in the indictment of military personnel implicated in the death of army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘) are not as serious as one might expect, and why the Cabinet "respects" local authorities' land policies that strongly resemble what happened at Wukan (烏坎) Village in China's Guangdong Province. Thus the central government did nothing to stop the demolition of people's homes in Miaoli County's Dapu Borough (大埔).

The real reason Ma's government can act in such a wanton and arbitrary manner is that there is nobody around who can pose a serious challenge to Ma's hold on power. No matter how much heckling, pushing and shoving may go on, Ma's presidency remains unchallenged and he can do as he pleases.

Everyone can see where the problem lies, so the question is, what can anyone do about it?

In 44 BC, Roman consul Julius Caesar, who had been proclaimed "dictator in perpetuity," was unwilling to hand his dictatorial powers back to the Senate of the Roman republic. Caesar was getting ready for a military campaign against the distant Parthian Empire and he was planning to take the title of king. Under the circumstances, only Caesar's closest associate, Brutus, and

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other members of the Senate were able to terminate Caesar's ambitions.

One of the advantages of the age of democracy is that there is no need to resort to violence. Nevertheless, the group of KMT accomplices who have been trampling on the public along with Ma should neither remain silent nor act wickedly. Up until now, they have not dissociated themselves from Ma and his policies or publicly reconsidered their own roles, but rather have willingly garnered votes for him.

The public should therefore take aim at these elected officials by removing their mandate and subjecting them directly to the people's judgment. Only by dismantling the KMT's power structure can fear be struck into the heart of the power-hungry Ma.

The public has the right to demand that each and every one of the KMT mayors and commissioners of three municipalities and 12 counties and county-level cities state their positions on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant and the service trade agreement.

The opposition alliance, for its part, has a duty to ally itself with civic groups and make preparations for launching recall campaigns in constituencies all around the country. If the opposition parties prove to be all talk and no action, if they just dilly-dally and fail to impose checks and balances on the government, then it is time to recognize that a new party has arisen in the shape of all the selfless and public-

spirited civic groups and individuals who have joined the fight for justice in recent weeks.

This new party has the potential to supersede the established ones and become a new guiding force in Taiwan.

Translated by Julian Clegg

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