

White shirts protests symbol of hope

Written by Liberty Times Editorial
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On Aug. 3, the Chinese characters for “injustice” and “truth” were beamed onto the tower of the Presidential Office Building via LED lights. About 250,000 people, mobilized over the Internet, came together on the streets of Taipei to express their strong opposition to the government led by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九). It was the second recent street protest organized by the group known as the “white shirts.”

The activist group Citizen 1985 that brought the white shirts together announced that from that day onward, they would be using “the eyes of the people” to keep a tight watch on the government and would not rule out taking to the streets again.

There has recently been a lot of discussion about this new group of protesters, with some comparing them to the “red shirt” protesters who demonstrated against then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) in 2006. However, they are essentially very different groups, and the white shirts are without a doubt a truly revolutionary movement, the likes of which the nation has never seen before.

The comparisons between the white and red shirts started at the protest on Aug. 3, when members of Citizen 1985 compared the two groups themselves.

They said that the number of people there that night surpassed the number of red shirts who protested in 2006. The number of people is a comparative basis for quantification, so we cannot say it is meaningless although it would be better viewed as being symbolic.

Red is just a color on the spectrum and lacks the connotations of black or white — or corruption and clean government. So naturally, this most recent protest was on a totally different level to that of 2006.

The gathering on Aug. 3 did not result from the appeal of politicians or opinion leaders. It did not emphasize heroism as the protesters clearly stated that they do not need heroes. No political parties got involved — it would have been difficult for them to do so anyway. The means the protesters used were simple. They did not carry out any large-scale public fundraising. Their demands were clear and devoid of complicated political goals. All of

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these factors are totally different to those of the red shirts in 2006.

It is especially worth noting that this new power was very different from the red shirts' in one major way and that was along organizational lines. The red shirts had a lot in common politically and similar interests. To put it plainly, those with vested interests did not represent the majority of the recent protesters as they did in 2006. The group was thus defined as a force for improving society, which was dissatisfied with the "status quo" and demanded change and justice.

In the past, this force lay dormant, but it has now been brought to the forefront by people. Also worth noting is that this was all done via the Internet, which helped market the event to the public and received attention from traditional media that also helped expand its influence. As a result, this inspired everyone, especially the majority, who normally remain silent.

After the pressure that the white shirts created manifested itself, certain opposition forces — although careful not to totally dismiss the white shirts — started to help those in power try to shift the focus and shirk responsibility. For example, the white shirts worked in a transparent manner with various civic and social organizations. They said in front of everyone present that civic society owes them support and encouragement.

However, as soon as they said this, talk emerged about how there were varying reasons for issues like the forced demolition of houses in Miaoli County's Dapu Borough (苗栗縣大埔鄉); the proposed referendum on the continued construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Gongliao District (共榮鄉); New Taipei City (新北市), the cross-strait service trade agreement and the death of army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘). It is just that the government is incapable of clarifying and responding to these issues.

Such an ingenuous distortion of the facts was aimed at emphasizing that all government policies dealing with the aforementioned issues were absolutely right, and it was just that the government is incompetent and does not communicate with the public enough. This sly tactic aimed at serving those in power was in fact a way of carrying out nonviolent resistance to the clear demands of the white shirts and was a hidden, ideological attempt at distorting what civic society thinks and weakening its awareness.

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When protesters started attacking Ma's attitude — on how he sees himself as king and the people as merely being his subjects — and demanded he step down, a group of retainers of those in power immediately came to his rescue. They tried to shake things up and push their pro-unification agenda by making a connection between the white shirts and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), saying that nobody was paying any attention to how the DPP had taken over the podium in the legislature while the white shirts were staging their sit-in on Ketagalan Boulevard.

Many people do not realize that if they had not chosen to take to the streets in front of the Presidential Office, the power represented by the white shirts, a power outside of the system, would have to use legal proceedings from within the established system to bring about what they believe in. As long as they have common goals, taking over the podium in the legislature and taking things to the streets are both necessary to solve the problems the nation is facing with constitutionalism. There is no difference between them in terms of importance.

This fear of anything that might be advantageous to the opposition is a clear example of their obsession with power and how it dictates their logic. Now, if these people truly believe that working outside of the establishment represents the best hope for getting things done, will they also agree with the white shirts calling on the public from now on to monitor Ma and his actions using "the eyes of the people" and speak out against him. If this is not the case, their shoddy attempts at protecting Ma as described above are surely a meaningless waste of time.

Although politicians did not initiate the latest white shirts campaign, its effects transcended traditional political lines and their demands were without a doubt purely "political." This group of young people said straight out that they wanted to use their identity as citizens bestowed upon them by the Constitution to direct certain issues, including those that are about to go through the legislature, such as the proposed referendum on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant and the service trade agreement.

As a result, a more accurate description of the white shirts would be that they are trying to use the contrast between white and black, or a clean and a corrupt government, to replace traditional Taiwanese political thinking that has been drawn along pan-blue and pan-green lines and that they are gathering the power of the public to participate in politics together so as to avoid becoming slaves of those in power.

These developments tell us that Taiwan's latest generation have hope and that Taiwan's future

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therefore is full of hope.

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