

Implications of sunflowers for Beijing

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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As the Sunflower movement protest drew to at least a temporary end, its subsequent development will be closely watched not only by officials of the embattled President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) administration, but also those in Beijing's Zhongnanhai.

It was not that Beijing was surprised at seeing such social unrest. Tens of thousands of protests take place in China annually, with civilian deaths resulting from brutal crackdowns reported regularly, despite the government's efforts to hide such information.

Neither was there reason for Beijing to panic at the thought that hundreds of students were able to break into the Legislative Yuan and the Executive Yuan — in China's case, it would be like people occupying the Zhongnanhai — thus momentarily paralyzing both branches of government.

On the contrary, Beijing always takes the opportunity to point out how often democracy fails in other countries, such as Thailand and, perhaps from now on Taiwan, to tell the Chinese that Western-style democracy could not work in a country of 1.3 billion. A significant percentage of Chinese buy this rhetoric.

Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) and the rest of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will have to closely monitor what the movement develops into for the following reasons.

First, the backdrop to the student movement is a global phenomenon of class struggle and generational war, in which the younger generation and people belonging to the "99 percent" have tried to speak out and fight the injustice of unfair distribution of socioeconomic resources. If that can happen in the US and Taiwan, there is no reason it could not happen in China, where the gap between social classes has widened despite the country emerging as a global economic and military power.

All it would take for China to experience the same large-scale social unrest is for circumstances to reach their boiling point.

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Second, Beijing might be concerned with the undertones of the Sunflower movement — the public's fear that the Ma administration's rapid tilt toward China, as well as Beijing's relentless goal of absorbing Taiwan economically will result in a point of no return, where unification becomes the only option.

The most notable warning to Beijing officials was that anti-China sentiment among Taiwan's young people has been rising in recent years.

A recent poll conducted by the pro-independence think tank Taiwan Brain Trust found that 55.8 percent of 20-to-29 year-olds and 58.9 percent of 30-to-39 year-olds saw China as a "hostile country," both at least 10 percentage points higher than other age groups. Meanwhile, 73.6 percent of the 20-to-29 age group and 68.3 percent of the 30-to-39 age group also showed strong support for Taiwanese independence, again higher than older generations.

Moreover, this demographic, which will be the backbone of Taiwan's society and the main target group of China's united-front effort in the next decade or so, are less likely to be affected by the CCP's current strategy, which exploits political competition in Taiwan, because they do not affiliate themselves with parties as their predecessors did.

Finally, Beijing may have to gauge the tempo of its unification plan as it watches Ma's next moves because Ma has been struggling to govern and is experiencing a strong backlash from the public over his rapid engagement with China.

He has hinted at his next move, saying during a video conference with the Center for Strategic and International Studies on Wednesday last week that he did not rule out engaging in political talks with Beijing.

Beijing will also have to reassess its policies toward Taiwan for the past 20 years and decide whether it should slow down or accelerate its unification efforts. It could perhaps begin grooming another pro-China leader in the "renegade province" — never good news for Taiwan.

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