

Odor of totalitarianism palls Taipei

Written by Jerome Keating
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The occupation of the Legislative Yuan has ended, and the legislature's agreement to discuss and debate the trade agreement in services before approval appears to be back on track.

Whether President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), who also serves as party chairman, and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) will keep their promise remains to be seen.

Similarly the hunger strike of Lin I-hsiung (林義順) and the numerous protests against the continuation of the building of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant seem to have achieved their purpose.

The building of that plant has been temporarily suspended. Whether there will also be a proper discussion and debate on the safety of nuclear power and its role in producing energy for Taiwan also remains to be seen.

Nonetheless, whatever the outcome, in both cases, one thing has become apparent — the residue of the KMT's past one-party state rule still dwells over the nation like a pungent odor.

From the numerous posters and cartoons to be seen during the occupation of the Legislative Yuan there can be no doubt that the recognition of Ma's double-speak and duplicity has clearly filtered down to the young.

That same lack of trust has also become evident with the protests over nuclear power and the fact that the protests did not stop with the simple KMT promise that it would look into it.

In both cases, when the smoke had settled and the streets were cleared, what remained staring everyone in the face was the continued avoidance of transparency and accountability by Ma and his administration as well as their inability to deal with the situation in a democratic way.

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In each of the two cases above, the consistent mantra of Ma and the KMT has been their well-worn cliché: “Trust us; we alone know what is best for the country. Do not try to examine and discuss who may actually be profiting in these matters.”

No one is buying that mantra anymore.

This black box of avoiding transparency has certainly been the key strategy in Ma’s handling of the service trade pact proposal.

We are not talking about the initial need countries have to negotiate in privacy; that is understood. However, what we are talking about is the avoidance of any discussion of what terms actually were agreed upon in each particular industry once the negotiations were over.

With its majority in the Legislative Yuan, the KMT is pretty well guaranteed of passing the pact, so the obvious question is, why does it not want the details of this agreement discussed item by item as the majority of the public want?

If the trade deal is as beneficial as the KMT claims, why not have it be demonstrated item by item?

This is the natural way for all to be convinced. Time cannot be used as an excuse, for the foiled attempt to try to slip the agreement through the legislature without discussion has already delayed its approval more than could be expected.

There has to be something more and the lack of transparency appears to be the rub.

What the aim of passing the agreement without discussion purposely avoids demonstrating is who and what sectors are profiting and who and what sectors are not? These are the details that the Ma administration does not want transparently exposed.

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A blanket pass could slip these details by until it was too late and the damage had already been done; but to have an item by item discussion and the passing of agreements in the open that would be harmful to particular industries is something that no legislator or president wants to face. The damage to numerous industries would increasingly be evident as the discussions were taking place.

The same can be said of the matter of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant.

When Lin began his fast, he made it clear that he would not oppose the completion of the plant if it were properly examined, debated and approved in the Legislative Yuan; it was his wish that the legislature along with the Executive Yuan accept accountability and take full responsibility for decisions.

Whatever personal reasons Lin held in opposing nuclear power for Taiwan, he would bow to the democratic process.

What Lin was stating repeatedly is that those in authority should not pass the buck. The Executive Yuan and the Legislative Yuan were the ones responsible for the safety of the plant and the country; they should do their duty and not pass responsibility off to a birdcage referendum.

Avoidance of transparency and a dodgy smokescreen again appeared to be the government's modus operandi.

However, this growing lack of and avoidance of transparency by the Ma government is not the only bone of contention. Another disturbing issue is also evident. For those who walk the streets of downtown Taipei, more and more barbed wire is going up, especially around government buildings. More and more barricades are being erected. What is happening? Is this a democratic president who professes to know what the people feel? Something is missing.

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To the outside world, Ma regularly makes the claim that relations between “democratic” Taiwan, the US and China are the best they have ever been; yet citizens inside Taiwan obviously question this and wonder.

Why is Taipei looking more and more like a city under siege? Is this a democracy where all voices are being heard? Perhaps the veneer the Ma administration was hiding behind has worn off.

Martial law was lifted in Taiwan in 1987, 27 years ago, yet the residue of the KMT’s one-party state somehow still remains over Taiwan like a pungent odor. Strange.

Jerome Keating is a commentator in Taipei.

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