Candidates deserve equal standards

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Without free and fair elections, Taiwan cannot consider itself a genuine democracy. A recent concern has emerged over the Civil Servants Election and Recall Act (公職人員選舉罷免法) which includes an article some deem discriminatory against candidates who do not hail from the main political parties.

Article 59 of the Civil Servants Election and Recall Act stipulates that only candidates nominated by political parties that have garnered 5 percent of the votes cast in the most recent elections can dispatch monitors to polling stations.

In other words, taking the year-end Taipei mayoral election as an example, only the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) and People First Party (PFP) qualified to send monitors to polling stations.

However, since the DPP, TSU and PFP did not field any candidates for the election, it means only KMT mayoral candidate Sean Lien's (連勝文) camp can send monitors to polling stations, whereas independent mayoral hopefuls Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), Neil Peng (馮光遠) and Shen Fu-hsiung (沈富雄) cannot — even though Ko maintains a significant lead in public opinion polls.

While some may be quick to argue that everyone should abide by the law and not seek to change the rules of the game, so to speak, those who make the argument are reminded that law is not sacred in the sense that it cannot be amended. If a law incurs legitimate concern, it should be open to debate for amendment.

Factoring in Taiwan's historical milieu and its authoritarian past, the problems of dirty tricks and misuse of government power have been concerns.

A look at past incidents prove the concerns. One may recall the notorious case of the 1992 legislative election in Hualien. Despite a positive electoral outlook ahead of the election, then-DPP legislative candidate Huang Hsin-chieh (黃信介) was defeated by 62 votes amid rumors of electoral irregularities. It turned out foul play was involved, with an extra 300 ballots cast for a district that had only about 500 eligible voters.

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One may also recall other tactics in past incidents such as a bag of ballots in favor of a specific candidate discovered long after votes were counted, electrical blackouts during vote-counting at polling stations, and the like.

Granted, the nation's democratization has made significant progress over the past three decades, with cases of foul play during vote-counting becoming less prominent, but there is no harm in making the vote-counting process more transparent to dispel any chance of skepticism.

By registering their candidacies, Ko, Peng, Shen and others meet their eligibility and campaign obligations and paid their campaign deposits with the Central Election Commission just as Lien did, but the Civil Servants Election and Recall Act should not take away their rights to send vote-counting monitors to polling stations just because they lack the backing of prominent political parties.

The Nov. 29 elections are expected to be more fierce than ever, given that nearly 20,000 candidates nationwide have registered for directly elected local government positions such as mayors and councilors of the special municipalities, county commissioners and councilors, city mayors and councilors, township mayors and councilors, and borough and village wardens.

The presence of vote monitors by the candidates is important in assuring fairness of the election; it could also help pre-empt any unnecessary post-election disputes.

In short, anyone who takes pride in being Taiwanese and values the nation's transformation into a genuine democracy should endorse the call to amend the Civil Servants Election and Recall Act to better ensure free and fair elections, to which every candidate is entitled.

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