

Rezoning proposals smells of vote-buying

Written by Hsu Shih-jung 許世瑋

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Election time has come around again and, as everyone knows, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) is in its element when it comes to organizing support, with the local party headquarters and grassroots support working together to mobilize core votes.

The thing is, the KMT is not a reformist party: Not only does it have little time for democracy and human rights, its members also suffer from a serious lack of ideals or passion for principles and doctrine. So how does the the organization mobilize its members?

It proffers them things they cannot refuse. The system by which it does this is to offer huge incentives, sometimes in the form of the promise of exorbitant profits that the majority of participants can get a piece of. More importantly, this inducement system operates through weaving dreams of prodigious wealth, appealing to the majority of local residents and profit-seekers, infecting them with a mania and getting them to hand over their votes.

Land rezoning and speculative development are part and parcel of this inducement system. Farmland is relatively cheap, so it is possible, through urban planning, zone expropriation and urban land consolidation, to rezone farmland for residential or business use, which can triple its market value. The allure of such easy pickings gets people scrambling for their piece of the action.

In the run-up to elections, politicians, local vote captains and brokers go into action. The way people vote becomes a deciding factor in whether or not land is rezoned and developed. Election campaigns are a trading floor and voting becomes just like bidding for contracts.

Seasoned politicians “prettify” these development plans in how they introduce them. Thus we have proposals such as the Taoyuan Aerotropolis, the Hsinchu Taiwan Knowledge Economy Flagship Park, originally known as the Puyu Development Plan, and the 12 “i-Taiwan” construction projects. The central government covers its back by dressing these plans up as “major national construction projects,” but the main objective behind them is to use them as a way to block objections and to build its case for expropriating land, speculate on property prices and win elections.

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When up against fierce opposition from farmers or local residents, candidates and the speculators they are in cahoots with just try to bully the less powerful, saying the needs of the majority outweigh those of the few, for the greater good.

Human rights issues are rarely solved by an appeal to the numbers of beneficiaries. If the protection of human rights does not quite fit in with the land expropriations, it does not matter how many people agree with the proposals, the politicians still have no right to proceed with the expulsions.

The KMT, so that it may win the election, uses government policy and the system, with things such as low taxes and interest rates, to complement land speculation, thereby raking in the benefit, both in money or by attracting votes.

This is because the people opposed to land-use rezoning and expropriation are farmers, who only want to protect their farmland and to continue farming it, in line with the law, despite the low returns, while the ones who are demanding the land be rezoned and wrested from the farmers want to speculate on property prices, in violation of the law.

The people who are using the land legally are having their rights stolen from them and are being displaced, while those who want to use the land in ways that are illegal are — far from being fined for breaking the law — handsomely rewarded. Does the nation stand a chance?

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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