

Democracy more than just a ballot

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Wednesday, 26 November 2014 08:35

Taiwan's democracy has always had its fair share of being labeled "immature." Yet calling it "chaotic" — which has become a trend among Chinese onlookers and, regrettably, among some Taiwanese — implies a warped view that democracy should be nothing more than casting and tallying votes. An elected government lauding this view and labeling those physically protesting against it as "undemocratic" should ring alarm bells about its reactionary and obscurant nature.

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) has tapped into this mentality with a TV commercial that says: "Democracy belongs to everybody rather than to those [with] loudspeakers... This is Taiwan; you do not have to bicker to secure a ballot."

The "loudspeaking" includes that taking place in the virtual world. KMT Taipei mayoral candidate Sean Lien (連戰) has complained that he is being "bullied" by netizens — who are unsurprisingly comprised primarily of the younger generation. Lien was referring to all the snarks and articles bombarding him with mocking, sarcastic comments about his remarks and deeds, his embodiment of "paternal capitalism" and the crony capitalism his family represents in Taiwan and China.

"Just because you do not call other people names on the Internet, you are wrong; because you do not take to the streets, you're wrong; because you quietly work hard and cannot get hold of the microphone, openness, reasoning and guilelessness became something that is wrong," the ad's voiceover says.

It calls on people, or the "silent majority" as the party likes to call them, to use their votes "to quietly speak out loud" on Saturday.

On the same day that the commercial was released, President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) was confronted at a campaign event for Lien by a group of laid-off freeway toll collectors who were protesting their situation.

They shouted: "[The government] cares only about the election and spares no attention to the workers" at him and other government officials who were on the stage.

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After the incident, Ma told the rally — to the supporters' fervent positive response — that they are against “[the protesters'] violent interference,” “their attitude of self-importance” and disrespect to others, and that the protesters were “interfering with others' free speech.”

“Just because you speak with a louder voice does not mean you're right,” Lien said and asked his supporters to “teach them a lesson with votes.”

Taken out of context, these remarks seem undeniably true, but their hypocrisy and preposterousness are self-evident, coming from people who are themselves holding microphones.

For those who were attacked by police when they were trying to make themselves heard, taking to the streets was probably their last resort. Who wants to go through all that toil and trouble if filing a complaint within the government framework was all that needed to be done?

Free public space, such as the streets and the online world, are the only places where the powerless and penniless can afford to make their voices heard.

Having a commercial broadcast on TV, while elegantly “quiet” in the sense that it does not disturb, costs money. So does taking out an ad in a major newspaper. Similarly, getting lawmakers with legislative immunity to spread mudslinging rumors and government agencies to speak in one's favor — all under the patina of legitimacy so it will not be seen as “bullying” — requires power.

The ones who have the most powerful loudspeakers in their hands are never those who were strangled and threatened by state power with the state apparatus at its disposal, and by the corporations colluding with it.

Democracy is not an institution that can be defined solely by voting, leaving out its inherent imperfections and the need for a vibrant civil society in which social movements and struggles

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take place.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2014/11/26](#)