

Government must listen to people

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Ministry of Economic Affairs' rationale for electricity rate increases last year was that state-run Taiwan Power Co (Taipower) needed the hikes to relieve its mounting debt. However, how should the nation make sense of Taipower's remarks last week that it had no plan to lower its rates anytime soon, even though it might see its first profitable year since 2006 thanks to the recent fall in global crude oil prices?

Global crude oil prices have dropped by more than a third since the middle of June, but how come fuel prices charged by state-run CPC Corp, Taiwan (CPC) and privately run Formosa Petrochemical Corp have not matched that decline, falling less than 20 percent during the same period? Has the Fair Trade Commission ever taken a hard line on the two refiners over their potential monopoly in this nation?

On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has often touted the benefits of last year's economic cooperation agreement with New Zealand, stressing the increase in bilateral trade as well as growing cultural exchange and tourism between the two nations. Yet, how can the continued rise in prices of infant formula and milk powder be explained, despite decreased import tariffs and lower costs for producers in New Zealand and other countries over the past two years?

How many seemingly unthinkable issues will it take before President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration admits that the public's anger toward the government has risen to a peak? Does this government still not know that a majority of voters were so furious with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) that it handed the party an unprecedented defeat in the Nov. 29 elections?

It is so obvious that rising costs of living in terms of higher prices of food, consumer items and utilities have pinched households — which have seen wage levels remain stagnant for more than a decade — let alone some other policies that have hurt business conditions for small and medium-sized companies, plus further degradation in both social justice and fairness.

Running a country is never an easy task, and government officials sometimes face judgment calls that can have grave consequences for the public and the nation. There is no simple solution, but there are steps which, if taken properly, could do much to lead the nation onto the right track. At the top of the list: The nation needs to have responsible and courageous officials

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in government who can take immediate action to stabilize consumer prices. In particular, the Fair Trade Commission needs to show its teeth at any and all unethical corporate behavior and market irregularities, and should punish businesses that are found to have participated in monopoly pricing, collusion or cartel activity.

Both before and after the elections, many lawmakers across party lines urged the government to become more responsible, initiating necessary action that takes into account people's livelihoods. However, the minimal reshuffle in the Cabinet is unlikely to change things for the better during the remainder of Ma's term.

So what is the point of reshuffling the Cabinet for the sake of reorganizing? What Taiwanese need is substance in a new Cabinet, not form. Satisfying the public might be thought of as a cliché by most government officials, but that does not mean it is an unworthy effort.

However, there have been no signs that Ma is listening to the voice of the public, thus there is little expectation that the KMT government will empathize with and care about people's livelihoods, especially those of ordinary people. This is pathetic.

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