

New parties face rare opportunity

Written by Liu Ching-yi 劉景熿

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Over the past year, there have been constant controversies concerning the public's fundamental rights, such as subsistence and property rights.

Apart from these, problems of unequal social distribution and a lack of justice have long defined Taiwanese society — and have time and again spawned public dissatisfaction with the ruling and opposition parties.

This state of dissatisfaction is becoming irrepressible and has reached a critical juncture.

The third political force that emerged around the time of the Sunflower movement, which broke out on March 18 last year, is a typical outlet for this kind of dissatisfaction.

The emergence of a third force gives rise to difficult questions about division, and plenty of parties and political commentators have raised slogans about how a new political setup can be created only through cooperation between opposition forces, and some have gone so far as to propose practical strategies for cooperation among these groups in the next election.

However, for newly formed political parties that want to deliver new political prospects for the nation, the most important role that they take on must surely be about how to achieve real accomplishments without forgetting their original aims.

The nation has had no lack of political third forces before now, but they have never been able to generate an impressive political climate.

Regardless of whether they end up marching together or apart, the new parties that have managed to take their first steps have an excellent political opportunity.

The new parties carry a social resonance that has been accumulated and called up through

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the unremitting efforts of many social movements over many years, in some cases arising from participants' courage to engage in conflict, no matter the price.

The implications of this resonance also include a public sentiment of unprecedented revulsion over many issues, including the ruling party's incapacity to govern the nation and opposition parties' failure to effectively oversee the government.

People are sick of seeing how boldly government and opposition politicians pursue their own selfish interests, while abandoning their basic values and forgetting that voters have entrusted to them the task of looking after the public good.

The new parties must therefore cherish this social resonance and make best use of it by sincerely proposing concrete political demands that echo public sentiment.

What they must not do is take these conditions for granted, and think that their particular parties offer the only way forward.

Even if people have great expectations of these new parties, these groups cannot survive in the long term by relying on an abstract social resonance.

Since they are determined to seek broad electoral support in their capacity as political parties, they face an electoral system that is highly disadvantageous for small parties, as well as a form of political competition that entails huge monetary costs.

It is not hard to imagine that, in this cruel political reality, they may consider the option of cooperating with current opposition parties.

However, their choices must not be determined according to personal friendships and attachments, and they cannot be reduced to simplistic slogans about ousting the governing party.

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They must present voters — especially young voters who are sick of the ruling and opposition parties and their longstanding division of spoils, as well as the old politics of class oppression — with policies that are in keeping with basic political ethics.

These new parties hope to achieve some success in next year's legislative election and break through the existing legislative stalemate.

Even if they have to cooperate to some extent with existing opposition parties, they must be clear about the necessity and justification of any alliance they engage in.

They must clearly explain on which values and policies they can closely agree with existing parties and obtain effective pledges from them, otherwise they are likely to be suspected of abandoning their original aims or easily selling out, and consequently lose one big advantage that they have — the support of young voters.

The new parties have arisen in response to the decay of constitutional government and the legislature's failures.

When the newcomers face the government and opposition parties' proposed constitutional amendments, which are limited in the degree of reform that they promise, they must seize this social consensus and courageously guide voters to make concrete demands of the two big parties for substantial constitutional reform.

The political options that the new parties consider must not be limited to the narrow framework currently in place between opposition parties.

Rather, they should think of ways to put pressure on the ruling and opposition parties to reconstruct the Constitution.

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They must not only demand that those parties actively pursue reforms of the electoral and government systems at the constitutional level, but also boldly put forward standpoints on human rights, which are an essential aspect of the new politics.

They must call on the government and opposition parties to institute a major overhaul of items in the Constitution that concern people's basic rights and go further by adding safeguard mechanisms that a modern nation should have.

Disappearing rights and nonexistent social justice are a symbol of collective shame for Taiwanese society.

In the course of challenging existing parties, new parties must continually call for constitutionalism to be reconstructed and for fair distribution to be enshrined in the political system.

They must hold on to values of social justice and human rights, rather than try to attain fame or political benefits.

Only if they can do these things will the new parties go down in history as the collective force that guided Taiwan to become a truly constitutional nation, and only by so doing can these parties hope to survive and prosper in the long term.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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