

Speaking in an interview with the Global Times, published by the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily, former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chairman Hsu Hsin-liang (許信良) denied that Taiwanese independence was an objective of the DPP when it was founded in 1986, adding that the founding impetus and the goal the party strove for was the realization of democracy. He agreed that some party members dream of independence, but said that it is a mainstream value within the party.

Since the party's establishment on Sept. 28, 1986, political and social tensions have become more intense. The turning point came when former president Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) talked of the three conditions for lifting martial law: Obeying the Republic of China (ROC) Constitution, supporting anticommunist policies and distancing oneself from the Taiwanese independence faction.

In response, then-DPP spokesman You Ching (游錫堃) issued a public announcement and the tension was temporarily resolved. The goal of founding a "Taiwan Republic" was included in the party charter in 1991. In light of this, Hsu's opinion does not seem unfounded.

Early on, the DPP was a melting pot of people who opposed the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT); the pursuit of democracy was the smallest common denominator. It did not take long before crucial founding members Fei Hsi-ping (費希平), Lin Cheng-chieh (林程澈) and Ju Gao-jeng (居高耿) left the party. The main conflict was over the independence issue.

During the pre-1986 dangwai (黨外, outside the party) period, people called for democracy, self-determination, saving Taiwan and letting Taiwanese rise to prominence. However, after the party's founding, organizational efforts by political victims and the self-immolation of democracy advocate Deng Nan-jung (鄧南雄) led to the 1991 inclusion of a call for a referendum on independence in the DPP's charter.

Hence, from 1986 to 1991, the DPP was strengthening its collective goal of formalizing and institutionalizing its discourse on independence. The wording in the party charter was finalized through debate and compromise, and the vision of independence was made crystal clear. It makes no sense to say that independence was never a mainstream DPP value.

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However, in late 1991, the DPP garnered less than one-quarter of the seats in the fully reformed Second National Assembly. A landslide victory was claimed by the KMT, led by then-president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), ensuring that reform would be carried out by revising, not rewriting, the Constitution. In the second legislative election in 1992, the DPP changed its party platform to focus more on public policy and less on ideology. Thereafter, former DPP leaders Hsu and Shih Ming-te (許信良) led a transformation driving the party's discourse on independence toward a phase of pragmatism, or ambivalence, in which the "status quo" was the main issue on the agenda.

The party's transformation can be seen as a readjustment in response to Lee's successful localization of the ROC and pressures from Beijing and Washington, with many seeing the DPP as favorite to win the presidency next year. This process should not be simplified by merely saying that the party betrayed its founding ideals.

Is the DPP an independence party? That is not something party members can decide for themselves. Despite the effort of former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) to reinterpret the party's plank regarding independence when he ran for president, he was still spoken of publicly as the sole pro-independence presidential candidate by then-Chinese premier Zhu Rongji (朱鎔記). Still, Chen won the presidential election in the end, did he not?

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