Beijing's efforts have backfired

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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"When Taiwanese independence becomes the mainstream public opinion, does the Chinese Nationalist Party [KMT] follow that mainstream opinion too?" The question, raised by soon-to-be-replaced KMT presidential candidate Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) on Sunday, says much about the party's dilemma.

In a way, Hung should be applauded for her loyalty to and genuineness about her political "ideals," if not ideology. As she has relentlessly pointed out, the KMT is at a loss for what it should be upholding — it has been drifting away from the idea of being the political alternative that could one day be chosen by the Chinese currently under Communist rule, who should be one day brought together with those in Taiwan to achieve long-overdue unification.

To Hung, the KMT has mistaken the means for the end — winning elections is the means for the party to be in power so that it can push its political agenda. If the political agenda is ditched, there is no point in winning.

This is also why she has been railing against what she believes to be "populism." Popular support for the KMT's "traditional values" has been waning rapidly, and the calls for Taiwanese independence and the recognition of Taiwanese identity have been getting louder, even while the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) seems to have brought the two sides of the Taiwan Strait closer.

"A party should lead the people and tell them the truth about the [nation's] predicament, instead of blindly following the mob," Hung said.

What Hung has missed is that her party has been striving to regain its ability to control public opinion, attempting to propagandize the benefits of a better relationship with China and instilling a pro-China perspective in high-school curriculum guidelines. To the party's dismay, its efforts met much resistance.

It is ironic that the KMT could probably use the fuss whipped up by Hung's presidential candidacy, and the retraction thereof, to say that the party's so-called "1992 consensus" is actually a "moderate" policy, especially when there is someone in the party standing further to

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the right on the political spectrum, who has been denounced by the party leadership.

However, the KMT has never explicitly said how Hung's cross-strait policy deviates from mainstream public opinion, as KMT Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) claims. After all, Hung is right in saying that there is no significant difference between her policy and the "one China" stance that the KMT upholds. If unification is a deviation, how come "one China" is not?

And while the KMT could try to make Taiwanese believe that the party is walking the middle way by rescinding Hung's candidacy, doing so would give those watching from the other side of the Taiwan Strait a slap in the face.

The replacement of Hung — who is believed to have been backed largely by, and whose cross-strait policy was masterminded by pro-unification groups — is a red flag to Beijing as well. It is a public rejection of the so-called pro-unification ideology — not by the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, but by a party with which Beijing has carefully cultivated its relationship.

The KMT is straddled between Taiwan's electoral wins and China's approval. The best scenario for it has been depicted by Hung: increasing the party's popularity by fostering a public that is friendly to policies that would also win China's favor. However, the reality defies such wishful thinking.

The KMT has made its choice. This will be a lesson to Beijing, or a turning point for its Taiwan policy. It is true that it might not take a turn for the better, as China might now put greater effort in skipping the political and bureaucratic structures and appealing to the public directly.

However, it is also true that it has to acknowledge that its KMT-only approach has backfired.

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