

When will Tsai start governing?

Written by Peng Ming-min 彭明敏

Monday, 01 May 2017 08:14

In February, former Executive Yuan director-general of personnel administration Chen Keng-chin (陳景文) called on civil servants to “milk their jobs” and “goof around” as much as possible to drag down the government, but the nation’s chief executive, who should be the one most deeply insulted by Chen’s remark, said nothing.

Protesters opposing pension reforms, who call themselves “heroes,” have been turning to violence and seem determined to take the nation down with them if their demands are not met, yet when police officers responsible for maintaining public order saw some of their retired former seniors among the rioters, they stood to attention and saluted.

All the government’s talk of harshly punishing those who use violence is useless if the authorities appear so weak.

In November last year, a group of retired generals went on a friendly visit to an enemy nation, where they sat and listened to instructions from that nation’s head of state and stood in respect for its national anthem — common sense and the Ministry of Defense’s own definition will tell you which enemy country we are talking about.

Yet the commander-in-chief of Taiwan’s armed forces, who, again, should be the one most deeply insulted, had nothing to say.

Living in today’s Taiwan, one often gets the feeling that important elements of the nation have gotten out of control, and it is hard to tell whether anyone is actually in charge.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), who was elected by a majority, seems to be growing more and more distant from the public. Sadly, the public’s impression of her is that whenever she makes a speech, be it on a big or small occasion and no matter whether her speech is long or short, she is always clutching a script from which she reads every word without ever raising her eyes.

When the speaker is uninspiring, the listener is uninspired. Tsai no longer shows any sign of

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her lively and friendly side, or of her wisdom as a prominent intellectual.

National leaders' success might stem from their verbal skill, their charisma, their good governance or their closeness to the public. How can Tsai put this nation back on its feet, establish democratic discipline and foster decent public behavior? I humbly and sincerely offer the following suggestions:

First, the president should climb out of her ivory tower, meet people face to face and engage in frank and honest dialogue with her constituents.

Second, she should greatly reduce the amount of "state secrets." The more secrets there are, the more doubtful and suspicious the public will be. Most "secrets" are really unnecessary and only serve to satisfy the sense of superiority of a handful of people who have a monopoly on the information.

The government should not just let the public know how things are, but also why things are the way they are. For example, what would be the harm in calling China "China" and Taiwan "Taiwan"?

What harm would it do if the legislature passed a normal referendum law like those of other democratic nations? What harm would come from freezing or abolishing the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission and the Taiwan Provincial Government? What negative impact could answering these questions possibly have on "national security"?

Third, Taiwan could set a trend by doing something even advanced democracies have not done. Tsai could expand on the examples of former US presidents Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" and Ronald Reagan's weekly presidential broadcasts by having national TV and radio stations set aside an hour every Sunday for a dialogue between the president and the public.

She could use the first half hour to explain a specific policy in simple and familiar language, without a script, and in the second half hour two media personalities — different people each

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week — could pose positive and constructive questions. Straightforward answers to straightforward questions: Such a program might make the public feel that the president is among them instead of being a distant figure.

Peng Ming-min was an adviser to former president Chen Shui-bian.

Translated by Julian Clegg

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