

Referendum rights and the pressure from China

Written by Peter Wang 王彼得

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A referendum might express the will of the public or it might decide policies. In both cases, it manifests the will of those who exercise sovereignty.

If Taiwanese do not have full referendum rights, they cannot be the true masters of the nation and they cannot be truly free — they are just the slaves of the nation's rulers.

When Taiwanese ditched the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime, it was to be the free masters of the nation, not to be the slaves of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Free people's complete referendum rights include the right to decide the convergence or separation of states. The EU is an example of the convergence of states, while Britain's exit from the EU and the options of independence for Scotland and Quebec are examples of separation.

Of course this includes the right to decide upon a national constitution.

The DPP has reservations about the scope of possible amendments to the Referendum Act (公投法) and there are even long-standing rumors that it would like to make it even more restrictive than it already is. The public sees China's possible reactions as the reason for the DPP's apprehension, ie, Beijing's approval or disapproval of any amendments.

The Referendum Act is really just a legal mechanism and the establishment of a comprehensive mechanism to hold referendums is purely an internal affair for Taiwan. To safeguard Taiwan's right to decide its own future and create the greatest possible space for domestic policy reforms, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has been taking a low-key approach toward China.

Taiwanese for the most part find this understandable and forgivable, but that does not mean that the people or the president should completely bow to pressure from China — especially when it tries to meddle in Taiwan's internal policies and domestic affairs.

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Support for a comprehensive Referendum Act means supporting freedom and human rights. It does not necessarily mean support for holding a referendum to decide between surrender and independence, still less does it mean actually supporting either surrender or independence.

Consider, for example, the question of drawing up a constitution. A referendum proposal to decide on a constitution, like any other proposal, would have to go through a series of stages, from the initial proposal, through the gathering of endorsement signatures, the establishment of a referendum, debates and finally the actual vote. The Tsai administration or any political party would be able to oppose the proposition at any stage to show “good will” to China.

However, they should not oppose the right to hold such a referendum at the legislative stage, as that would entail depriving Taiwanese of their basic human rights and broad freedoms.

In the world of political science it is said that “foreign relations are an extension of domestic policy,” but nobody says “domestic policy is an extension of foreign relations,” and for good reason. If the idea that “domestic policy is an extension of foreign relations” was taken to its logical conclusion, it would result in almost any matter being influenced by foreign-policy objectives and the pressure exerted by other countries.

With regard to cross-strait ties, China has preferences and opinions about almost every internal Taiwanese affair and seeks to exert pressure accordingly. If Taipei bowed down to Beijing’s opinions and pressure in all matters, surely that would reduce it to the status of a Chinese colony that enjoyed neither sovereignty nor autonomy.

Peter Wang is the founder of the Taiwan Republic Campaign.

Translated by Julian Clegg

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