

Referendum better than drawn-out protests

Written by Chang Kuo-tsai 張國才

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The independence referendums recently held by the Kurds and the Catalans have renewed the referendum debate among Taiwanese.

In European and North American democracies, referendums are as natural as breathing and sleeping. After all, is there a more democratic way to find out what a plurality of the public thinks about an issue that cannot be resolved by other means?

Of course, no one can guarantee what the majority will decide, but referendums ensure that everyone can participate in the decisionmaking process and share the responsibility for the outcome regardless of the result.

While some people hold the perverted opinion that referendums are dangerous, others naively consider them a panacea for all unresolved issues.

Still others, worried that referendums would become overused, emphasize the limitations needed on referendums, suggesting that subjects related to science and religious freedom should not be put to a referendum.

This is all nonsense. Today, everyone understands that the right and wrong of scientific questions and theory can be objectively determined, rather than subjectively chosen. Science is not a matter where the minority must abide by the majority's decision, and scientific theory cannot and will not be decided in a referendum.

Speaking of religious freedom, a wide range of deities are worshiped in Taiwan, including the Buddha, the goddess Matsu, the Christian God, Virgin Mary and Allah, but there are also many atheists. Even those who worship religious impostors are free to do whatever they want without interference from the authorities, until someone reports possible violations of the law to the police.

The law will only be used against religious activities that cause danger or damage to people or

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the environment. Anyone who thinks a referendum can change that has a very vivid imagination.

Referendums are a matter of choosing between different political systems and policies, and between different lifestyles. Sri Lanka was called Ceylon in the past and Cambodia used to be known as Kampuchea. Who said a nation's name cannot be changed?

The US national flag has changed from having only 13 stars to having 15, 20, 48, 49 and eventually 50 stars. New Zealand has had two referendums on whether to change its national flag, in 2015 and last year. Who said the national flag cannot be changed?

As a country's name, national flag and national anthem can all be changed, anything can be changed. If the legislature cannot decide whether the nation should adopt a presidential, a parliamentary or a semipresidential system, that could certainly be decided through a referendum.

Likewise, if legislators are too lazy to decide whether the voting age should be lowered from 20 to 18, why not let voters decide in a referendum?

Major social issues typically prompt different groups to call for different aspects to be prioritized — which could be anything from the environment to the economy and transitional justice — and there are always two sides to the coin.

Some support nuclear power, some oppose it, and the same applies to building casinos and many other things. Instead of allowing the debate to drag on as different groups take to the streets to promote their views, why not solve the problem in a referendum?

After all, is it not the true spirit of democracy to make important decisions together and share the responsibility for the consequences, no matter how things turn out?

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