

Civil society can assist Taiwan with challenges

Written by Michael Danielsen
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Taiwan's future independence relies in part on the nation's ability to activate the vast potential of civil society, as the government cannot not speak and act freely.

China is increasingly pressuring multinational companies and strong European countries to list Taiwan as a province of China. This includes hotels, airlines and countries like Sweden. Moreover, Beijing is influencing or creating various cultural events in Europe to emphasize its perspective.

For this and other purposes, China has segmented European nations into different categories. This allows Beijing to target each segment for different strategic goals.

Anti-Chinese sentiment is slowly on the rise, but Europe is divided on foreign policies and the EU itself is primarily focused on trade, and China is an important market. Consequently, Taiwan risks losing this battle of influence and public opinion.

Taiwanese face these challenges on the road to independence, despite the nation's soft power in various areas such as high-tech, culture and democracy.

However, Taiwan can walk faster down the avenue of independence and might turn the battle around regarding influence and public perception if civil society is engaged more creatively.

In politics and international affairs, Taiwan needs more public voices in the media and at various types of meetings that can voice the arguments that government officials cannot say publicly.

Moreover, Taiwanese officials tend to be more reactive than proactive to negative media coverage, and their proactive attempts tend to be written in a diplomatic language, which is of no interest to journalists.

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In the efforts to promote Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly, government officials can and do ask politicians for support, but it is rarely given substantial coverage in the media or elsewhere. This requires detailed knowledge and the ability to make a strong argument, which government officials and European politicians are not capable of doing.

A complex network of contacts can make Taiwan more visible. Academia, journalists and civil society must meet so that more opportunities can be created. Civil society needs freedom or a lack of control to do this. However, freedom will sometimes result in negative coverage.

Taiwan is already engaging with civil society and has done a great job in several countries. Taiwan should focus on making the engagement less official and more free. The latter might result in more unpredictable outcomes, but they can supplement current activities.

Independent civil groups should be contacted as the public finds them more acceptable.

It is equally important that the groups be financially independent. Civil society groups exist in Europe and have different agendas. Most of the groups are private coffee clubs that promote social networking or non-active discussion of Taiwanese politics.

However, there are groups that are willing to go public and work for Taiwan and get other people out of their coffee clubs.

Taiwan's road to independence requires creativity and civil society can contribute to this end with or without the government's support.

However, without encouragement, Taiwan risks losing the battle.

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