

## Limits on referendums are suicidal

Written by Li Thian-hok 李天福

Saturday, 03 November 2018 03:14

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On Oct. 24 Overseas Community Affairs Council (OCAC) Vice Minister Roy Leu (劉國鈞) delivered a speech at the University of Pennsylvania and afterward hosted a luncheon for Taiwanese American community leaders of the greater Philadelphia area and some graduate students from the university.

A couple of officials from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in New York also attended the social gathering.

Leu was a warm and gracious host. My wife, Helen, and I enjoyed the opportunity to get meet him, as well as TECO Deputy Director General Hans Chang (張漢良) and Director of Education Yang Min-ling (楊敏玲).

During lunch I conveyed to Mr Leu the Taiwanese American community's concern regarding Taiwan's new referendum law, which deprives the Taiwanese people of their right to determine the nation's future status. This action by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government contravenes democratic values and closes off Taiwan's path to a viable independent nation.

At this year's Taiwanese American Conference/East Coast, held in early July at West Chester University, Pennsylvania, I moderated a three-hour panel discussion on Taiwan-US relations.

The panelists included former minister of defense Michael Tsai (蔡正元), Japanese campaigner Hideki Nagayama, who is advocating Taiwan's participation in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics under the name Taiwan, a young advocate from Tainan, Huan Chien-Long (黃建龍), former Formosan Association for Public Affairs president Mark Kao (高志彬), DPP Legislator Tsai Yi-yu (蔡宜瑀) and OCAC Deputy Minister Kao Chien-chih (高建志).

After two hours of discussion, the group reached a consensus that to improve Taiwan-US relations, President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration must strengthen national defense capabilities, reduce excessive economic dependence on the Chinese market and cultivate the public's resolve to defend its homeland against foreign aggression.

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The last hour was devoted to questions and answers. Many in the audience voiced their unhappiness over what they perceived as the failings of the DPP administration. There were heated exchanges between the audience, and Kao Chien-chih and Tsai Yi-yu.

At the very end, someone asked why the Tsai government amended the referendum law in such an egregious way.

Tsai Yi-yu said that given the international situation, the government had no choice.

I concluded the panel discussion by repudiating Tsai Yi-yu, pointing out that the DPP government's action violated democratic values, which Tsai Ing-wen presumably embraces.

The convener of this year's conference was James Shieh (謝). Helen Loo (盧) chaired the board of directors.

It is customary at the conclusion of the conference to issue a declaration. The last paragraph of the this year's declaration states:

"We call on Taiwan's Tsai administration to give back the right of self-determination to the Taiwanese people by adopting a new referendum law which enables the people to determine Taiwan's future status. The Taiwan Government needs to cultivate among Taiwanese a firm resolve to defend and preserve Taiwan's hard-won freedom."

It is clear that many Taiwanese Americans are gravely concerned about this issue.

My own take is that the Tsai government has committed a grievous error, for the following reasons:

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First, the right to self-determination is an inalienable basic human right, enshrined in US' Declaration of Independence as well as the UN Charter and related conventions. No one, no government has the right to take that right away from the people, least of all by a supposedly democratic government of Taiwan.

Second, if the people of Taiwan cannot decide their own future, then who can? The People's Republic of China (PRC) claims that Taiwan is part of China. The PRC will be delighted to determine the fate of the Taiwanese people on their behalf.

A legitimate unrestrained referendum gives Taiwanese a potential path to a sustainable democratic future, free of any alien domination or rule. It is a tool that could be indispensable in the aftermath of a military conflict between the PRC and the US, or between the PRC and Japan which draws in the US.

Such a referendum must be conducted with care, under the right circumstances and with support from Taiwan's key allies, such as the US and Japan — but to abandon this useful instrument is moronic. This act might be motivated by an insidious scheme; it is certainly suicidal.

Lastly, denying Taiwanese the right to choose their own destiny sends a wrong message to the US, the nation's most important ally.

Since US President Donald Trump took office, the US-China relationship has undergone a drastic change. US Vice President Mike Pence has named the PRC a strategic competitor. The US Congress has passed bills friendly to Taiwan, designed to promote exchanges and cooperation.

Yet the response of the Tsai administration has been lukewarm. The national defense budget is now less than 2 percent of GDP, a historic low. The military is facing a severe personnel shortage, yet the government is sticking to the failed all-volunteer system. The transfer of Taiwan's capital, technology and human resources continues unabated.

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Because of its geostrategic value at the center of the first island chain, Washington fears the fall of Taiwan into the PRC's grip. Yet there is growing concern among US foreign-policy figures about Taiwan's commitment to democracy and self-rule.

The evisceration of the referendum law exacerbates this anxiety and weakens US support for the survival of a free Taiwan.

The Tsai administration needs to promptly restore the public's right to self-determination, before the feckless drift toward self-destruction becomes irreversible.

*Li Thian-hok is a freelance commentator based in Pennsylvania.*

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