

Reactions from several leading Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) members in response to former premier William Lai's (賴清德) decision to challenge President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) re-election bid have been disappointing and raise questions over their dedication to the values that the party's name suggests.

Shortly after Lai on March 18 registered for the DPP's presidential primary, senior members — including Presidential Office Secretary-General Chen Chu (陳 Chu), DPP Secretary-General Luo Wen-jia (羅文嘉) and Taoyuan Mayor Cheng Wen-tsan (鄭文燦) — stressed the importance of unity, with Chen declaring her support for Tsai, while DPP Legislator Chen Ming-wen (陳明文) led 34 party lawmakers in signing a letter endorsing the president.

Then DPP Chairman Cho Jung-tai (卓榮泰) expressed concern that should Lai win the primary, it might cause a constitutional crisis for the nation, as Tsai would be a lame duck for the remainder of her term.

Furthermore, DPP city and county councilors — fearing that a fierce primary could split the party — are clamoring for Tsai and Lai to run on the same ticket.

These anti-democratic sentiments suggest that the party's supposed dedication to fostering the values of democracy is taken at face value by most DPP members, who are subconsciously still rooted in a feudal mindset.

Those who champion party unity at the sight of a challenger confronting a sitting leader have more to do with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which, whenever it is faced with change, displays reluctance to reform with calls for “party unity.”

Former DPP chairman Yu Shyi-kun (俞灝坤) hit the nail on the head with his piercing remarks that the word “unity” has “become the shackle with which people in power and those with vested interests fetter others.”

As for the risk of a “constitutional crisis,” even if Tsai loses the primary, her term is guaranteed by law through May 19 next year and the nation would be governed as usual as set out in Article 53 of the Constitution, which stipulates: “The Executive Yuan shall be the highest administrative organ of the state.”

Those who were swift to call for a Tsai-Lai pairing expose their misalignment in a political party that brands itself as “democratic.” Why would they favor political intervention over the impartial rules and fair play that are central to democratic politics?

Despite Cho’s reiteration that the party headquarters is neutral, “not harboring preference for a sitting president,” it is bizarre that he has set up a team tasked with “finding common ground between Tsai and Lai.”

As Cho noted, mediation is a lawful mechanism, but the move nonetheless defies the principles of democratic conduct. If Lai is to be “mediated” out of the primary, on what grounds would Tsai be able to convince the DPP’s grassroots supporters that she could win next year?

American political scientist Elmer Eric Schattschneider highlighted the role of political parties in developing democracy, saying: “the political parties created democracy ... and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.”

A truly democratic party would value constructive competition, as it increases public engagement with democracy; and a democracy is stronger when people are well-informed and can make meaningful choices.

Only with a level playing field would all sides consent to the result, regardless of whether they win or lose.

Hopefully, DPP headquarters has the wisdom to run its presidential primary on fair terms, befitting the party’s name. Otherwise, it might as well change its name to the “democratic regressive party.”

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