DPP can win the Aboriginal vote

Written by Chen Chi-nung 陳其南
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During a meeting of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Central Standing Committee on Oct. 14, there was a discussion about why independent Legislator May Chin (高金素梅) has been re-elected so many times, with President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) asking why Chin enjoys such unwavering support.

Being one-eighth ethnic Paiwan, Tsai might be wondering why the DPP has not won more Aboriginal votes in general and local elections during her presidency than it did in the past.

She probably wonders why Chin, who is known to be friendly to China, has such a secure hold on one of the three seats that represent the Legislative Yuan's highland Aboriginal constituency.

Answering this question requires an understanding of Aboriginal culture, which would point the DPP toward three directions to follow: monitoring the flow of money, emphasizing service and cultivating talent.

Aborigines traditionally see their local communities as most important. They originally had no concept of any political entity on the scale of a nation state, and had even less of a national identity. Even today, the village has a greater influence over their lives than anything that happens at a national level.

Aborigines revere nature and see things in a plain and simple way, so if large amounts of money flow into their communities, be it subsidies for traditional festivals or rewards offered by campaign agents, they tend to think that one good turn deserves another when elections come around.

That being the case, when general elections — and legislative elections in particular — near, the DPP Central Committee should keep a close eye on whether the police and prosecutors are doing their duty by investigating vote-buying, and dealing with it firmly but fairly when it happens.

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It should tell financial institutions to keep tabs on where individuals' money is going, to prevent it from being used to buy votes.

The next thing the DPP should do is pay attention to the services it provides at the grassroots level. Although the DPP calls itself a Taiwan-centric party and Tsai has publicly apologized for successive governments' longstanding lack of respect for Aborigines, these things have no practical effect.

Aborigines do not care much about policies that are distant from them. They would be more impressed by real construction or subsidies for their communities.

To do a proper job of providing grassroots services, local DPP elected representatives and party members should connect with Aborigines whose political views are nearer to those of the DPP. They should take the initiative by going to communities and finding out what problems there are, so that they can look after people's everyday needs.

Finally, the longest-lasting, deepest-reaching political project that the DPP should tackle is the cultivation of talent. It has tended to appoint the people who decide its Aboriginal policies from among Aboriginal activists in democratic and social movements.

However, rank-and-file civil servants and teachers have greater influence in Aboriginal communities, because they are highly visible, perform many services and are closest to their residents.

DPP Legislator Saidhai Tahovecahe (伍麗華), who is based in Pingtung County, is a good example of this. She started out as a teacher and later became an elementary-school principal. During those years, she accumulated a lot of experience providing services at the community level.

In 2016, Pingtung County Commissioner Pan Men-an (潘孟安) appointed her as head of the county government's Department of Indigenous Peoples.

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Tahovecahe's experience at the grassroots level and in the county government is what enabled her to win one of the highland Aboriginal seats in January's legislative election.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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