

DPP has to push its own policies

Written by Chin Heng-wei 陳恆偉

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The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) have been trading blows over the four hotly contested referendums to be held on Saturday. Both parties regard the referendums as a battle that neither can afford to lose.

Compared with the ruling DPP, the KMT is on the offensive, and is short on power and resources. The most it can do is to fight with words. KMT Chairman Eric Chu (吳敦義) and former KMT chairman Johnny Chiang (江丙坤) have defined this referendum vote as a “citizens’ war,” pitting ordinary Taiwanese against the government.

“The DPP is deploying its powers and endless resources against Taiwanese,” Chu said, while Chiang said: “If the four referendums fail to pass, it will be the failure of the public.”

While the KMT has molded the referendum into a reflection of public will, it has bypassed the definition of referendums. The right to propose referendums is not the preserve of citizens. The Executive Yuan, the Legislative Yuan and the president are eligible to propose referendums.

For example, former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) proposed the 2008 referendum on UN membership for Taiwan.

To characterize the referendums as “citizens vs the government” is, of course, a political tactic, in which “the citizens” are an abstract entity, not a homogeneous group.

With different classes, levels of welfare, communities, values and ideologies involved, the KMT cannot say that it represents “the citizens.”

Political science academic Gordon Smith once characterized referendums into two groups: “controlled vs uncontrolled” and “pro-hegemonic vs anti-hegemonic.”

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If the timing and holding of the referendum vote is controlled by the government, then it is considered “controlled” and “pro-hegemonic.” If it is enacted on the initiative of citizens, it is “uncontrolled” and “anti-hegemonic.”

Smith’s theory and research have proved that the former favors the ruling party, while the latter favors the opposition. In Taiwan’s case, the four referendums actually work against the DPP.

While President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) proposed a “head-on battle” at the DPP’s National Convention, the KMT has been lambasting the DPP for “mixing party and state.”

However, the KMT’s accusation could have only existed in the party-state system adopted by the KMT back when there was “one party, one principle, one leader,” and leaves no room for “alternative parties or internal factions.”

It is impossible for the government to combine party and state in democratic Taiwan. As a democratic government runs on party politics, it is perfectly acceptable for the government to push the ruling party’s policies.

Then there is the matter of administrative neutrality. The four referendum initiators held a news conference, excoriating the DPP administration for contravening administrative neutrality with regards to the referendums.

“The ruling Democratic Progressive Party is exploiting administrative resources and the state apparatus for partisan gains, forcing civil servants to speak up for it,” Chiang said.

KMT Legislator Chen Hsueh-shen (陳學聖) is withholding the budget review in protest against the issue.

If we apply the theory of political economist Joseph Schumpeter, democratic politics is about campaigning for votes to win the right to rule.

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In other words, pushing for one's policies after obtaining a mandate has nothing to do with neutrality. As the four referendums are related to the DPP's policies, it is only fitting that the DPP deploys the "state apparatus" to promote its policies in a democratic regime.

While the four referendums are "anti-hegemonic" for the KMT, they are about maintenance of hegemony for the DPP.

There is no breach of neutrality when the DPP is promoting the policies of the Tsai administration, an action that perfectly fits into the parameters of responsible politics and party politics.

Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation chairman Michael You (游錫堃) said the whole DPP was "acting in connivance," while Representative to Germany Shieh Jhy-wei (謝志偉) said the party was "acting in solidarity."

No matter what, there is no denying that the DPP is doing all it can to contest an "uncontrolled referendum."

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Translated by Rita Wang

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