

As the dust settles following Saturday's referendums, some facts are emerging.

First, none of the four referendums secured the legally required threshold and, despite this, the majority of voters ticked "no" for all four proposals — the position that was the most beneficial to Taiwan and was advocated for by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Taiwan Statebuilding Party.

Although the government's policies on energy, international trade and holding referendums separately from major elections can now continue, the only clear result was on the question of whether to restart construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City's Gongliao District (公寮).

In the three others, the number of "no" votes was on average only 3 percent higher than the number of "yes" votes.

The referendums were clearly initiated with the intention of rattling the governing party, and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) was quite explicit in saying that it was trying to "teach the DPP a lesson."

In the absence of any substantial scientific evidence to back up its position on any of the issues, the KMT relied solely on populist, divisive tactics to persuade people to vote "yes." It succeeded in Keelung and Taoyuan, where the "yes" votes on all four questions exceeded the "no" votes.

The results in those cities were particularly bad for the DPP, which had the advantage of having the resources of the president, the mayors, the local party organization and the Taiwan Statebuilding Party working for it.

It cannot lay claim to victory on a national level: At best, it can say that it did not lose.

Post-referendum enmity to persist

Written by Hong Tsun-ming 洪振明
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The results are a major warning sign for proponents of localization: They can in no way afford to let their guard down for the coming by-election in Taichung's second electoral district or independent Legislator Freddie Lim's (林錫山) recall vote.

Even though the KMT was unable to produce a unified front in its referendum campaign, the number of "yes" votes it managed to drum up suggests that its approach of stirring up enmity against, and a lack of trust in, the governing party did pay dividends, and the pan-blue camp is likely to continue pursuing this strategy.

Most notably, the KMT has started to attack Taiwan's democracy by weaving distortions of the truth into its narrative.

In a speech after the referendum results were confirmed, KMT Chairman Eric Chu (吳敦義) did not call for a cessation of the hostility or for Taiwanese to try to heal rifts, but further stoked social tensions.

He said that "the referendum is dead" and called the DPP "an autocratic government," promoting the absurd, populist contention that "distrust of the government" is somehow equal to democracy.

The atmosphere of enmity created ahead of the referendums is likely to be fanned in the coming weeks and months, constituting a real threat to Taiwan's democracy and freedoms.

The referendums were initiated to aid political manipulation in the name of the democratic process.

Had the four referendums passed, especially those involving energy sources and international trade, the results would have been disastrous for Taiwan.

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Disregarding Taiwan's best interests and wasting national resources, the referendums not only failed to mitigate the shortcomings of the legislature through direct democracy, they wasted huge amounts of time and resources.

At the same time, the referendums revealed that Taiwan's civil society is not yet mature and its international outlook still needs reinforcing after so many years of the nation being marginalized, with the ability of Taiwanese to have independent thoughts being curtailed by years of rote learning in the education system.

However, there are some internal factors that are serving as a natural immunity, protecting Taiwan's democracy, issues that Taiwanese must face head on if they are to ensure that Taiwan's democracy and freedoms continue to thrive.

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