

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)-controlled legislature yesterday blocked an opposition-sponsored bill calling for a referendum on a proposed economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with China.

The bill — which would also have created a legislative ECFA monitoring team — was rejected by the Procedure Committee, marking the sixth time the proposal has been blocked.

Lawmakers voted along party lines, with 10 KMT lawmakers voting against including the bill on Friday's legislative schedule and three Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lawmakers voting in support.

Prior to the vote, the DPP caucus had expressed optimism that KMT legislators would support the bill after Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) said the government wasn't opposed to holding a referendum on the proposed trade pact.

A petition for a referendum by the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) party is expected to make its way to the Executive Yuan's Referendum Review Committee by the end of the week. It is unclear whether the committee will accept the TSU proposal after rejecting a similar proposal by the DPP late last year.

However, under Article 2 of the Referendum Act (公職), the legislature can sidestep the review committee and submit government policy measures to the Central Election Commission for a referendum with a majority vote.

Criticizing the DPP's position, KMT lawmakers said that the proposed monitoring team could contravene legislative procedure, adding that referendums should be left to civic organizations rather than political parties.

KMT caucus whip Lin Yi-shih (林錫山) said that the KMT caucus wasn't against an ECFA referendum but had concerns that politicians would use the referendum for political purposes.

Some DPP lawmakers said the establishment of an ECFA monitoring team has been privately supported by Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平). However, they said that yesterday's vote showed the limited influence the speaker has on individual KMT lawmakers.

DPP Legislator Chiu Yi-ying (邱毅) said that the vote indicated that KMT officials "operated on different wavelengths," and criticized Wu for failing to back up his comments.

"The KMT is clearly unable to follow up on its earlier promises to stop blocking the referendum," she said. "They owe the public an explanation."

Chiu added that the Procedure Committee did not reflect public opinion.

Pan-blue lawmakers led by the KMT hold a majority of the seats in the 113 member

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legislature. KMT lawmakers head all eight of the legislative committees and its majority in the Procedure Committee has led to criticism that bills proposed by the opposition have been stifled.

Public concerns over the committee mounted between 2005 and 2006 after the KMT-controlled Procedure Committee struck down a proposal for a large US arms deal 64 times.

“It's unacceptable that the Procedure Committee has kept our ECFA bill from being openly debated in a full legislative meeting,” Chiu said.

DPP caucus whip Chai Trong-rong (蔡丁龍) called the vote “disappointing” but added that party lawmakers could continue to try for a seventh time.

Meanwhile, Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) yesterday defended the government's plan to sign an ECFA, and said as the nation's capital city and business hub, Taipei City would benefit from it.

Defending President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) policy, Hau said the ECFA debate between Ma and DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) on Sunday would be a debate on whether Taiwan should open its market to the world or close its doors on more opportunities.

“Taipei City would benefit from the lower tariffs and the opening of China's market after we sign an ECFA [with China] with little negative impact. Facing global competition, Taipei will be prepared for various works after the ECFA is signed with an open mind,” Hau said yesterday at Taipei City Hall.

The Ma administration's plan to sign an ECFA with China, slated for sometime in June, has been opposed by the DPP. The opposition camp has accused the government of lacking transparency in negotiating an ECFA with China, and challenged the government over the negative impact an ECFA might have for traditional industry and the local labor market.

Hau yesterday declined to say whether he supported the DPP's proposal to hold a referendum on an ECFA, while stressing the city government's determination to protect local workers that may be affected by the economic pact. Statistics from Taipei City's Department of Economic Development say an ECFA would bring NT\$70 billion (US\$2.2 billion) profit to the manufacturing industry in Taipei and create more job opportunities in the service and retail industries.

The department said that in Taipei City, a total of 95 companies in traditional industries, including towel, shoe and bedding manufacturers, will receive subsidies or other administrative assistance from the city government after an ECFA is signed.

Hau said the city government will also protect the rights of consumers by enhancing food and

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product safety inspections, while ensuring that no products that violate intellectual property rights would enter the city.

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