

Academics warn of danger to democracy

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Academics assessing the nation's democratic performance during the first half of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) term yesterday urged the public "to provoke disputes" to revive the system of checks and balances that they said has been noticeably weakened under Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) rule.

"The nation's democracy has been in peril these past two years and I have been wondering on ways to resolve it, and my conclusion is that intellectuals must use [their] knowledge to provoke [public] disputes," said Liu Chin-hsing (劉欽興), professor of chemistry at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology.

Liu made the remarks at a forum hosted by Taiwan Democracy Watch to assess Ma's performance ahead of the second anniversary of his inauguration on Thursday.

Taiwan Democracy Watch was formed by academics following the Wild Strawberry protest initiated by college students in November 2008 in opposition to the Parade and Assembly Act (集會遊行法) cited by the government when cracking down on protests over the visit of China's Association for Relations Across the -Taiwan Strait Chairman Chen Yunlin (陳雲林) that year.

Taiwan Democracy Watch listed 10 events that took place over the last two years that they said highlighted problems holding back democracy in Taiwan and showed the importance of civil society.

Topping the list was the execution of four death row inmates on April 30 after a de facto moratorium that had been in place since late 2005.

Chen Shang-chih (陳尚志), an associate professor of politics at National Chung Cheng University, said that one main problem with democracy in Taiwan is the longstanding malfunction of the system of checks and balances, as a result of which "the government is not held accountable."

There is a widely accepted notion in Taiwan that the system of checks and balances in democracy exists between parties rather than agencies, but that is to misunderstand the nature of democracy, Chen said.

"Without a sound system of checks and balances between agencies, the government fails to clearly answer questions from lawmakers, disclose information people need to know and incorporate opinions from civil groups in the policy-making process," he said.

Chen said the situation became even more complicated with the appointment of King Pu-tung (邱正德) as secretary-general of the KMT, after which it appears a series of policies of public concern, ranging from the proposal to sign an economic cooperation framework agreement with China to the protocol on expanding imports of US beef and beef products, among others, were made under the table.

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Exploring the cause of the problems, Hsu Szu-chien (許雪姬), an assistant research fellow at the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, said that Taiwan is still influenced by its authoritarian past.

As an example, he said the enactment of the Civil Service Administrative Neutrality Act (公務員行政中立法) prohibits officials, including research fellows in public academic institutions, from -engaging in politics, supporting or opposing political parties, political organizations or candidates for public office.

The act not only deprives civil servants of their basic rights but also restricts academic freedom, Hsu said, adding that the legislation had a “chilling effect.”

“[I know that] some research fellows have worried that they might be in violation of the act if they publish articles that are critical of the government’s environmental policies,” Hsu said.

Celebrating the second anniversary of his inauguration, Ma is slated to use the occasion on Thursday to discuss his performance in the first half of his term and his administration’s future direction.

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