

NGOs form ECFA monitoring group

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Unsatisfied with what they called a lack of transparency surrounding cross-strait negotiations, Taiwanese NGOs yesterday launched a cross-strait-agreement monitoring alliance aimed at increasing public accountability and protecting democratic values.

The initiative, which has drawn support from human rights, labor and government watchdog groups, aims to increase pressure on the government to publicize its agreements with China, which they say have so far been shrouded in secrecy.

Inspiration to create the alliance came as the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)-led government, via a semiofficial government body, concluded the signing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China.

The deal was signed in Chongqing, China, on Tuesday, despite calls by opposition parties that the controversial trade pact first be subjected to a nationwide referendum.

Speaking at a press conference outside the legislature and alongside 20 other members of the alliance, alliance convener Lai Chung-chiang (賴昌強) said it was important that the group stringently monitor the ECFA based on a democratic and human rights standpoint.

“Taiwan and China could begin negotiations for goods, services or investment-related agreements within six months after the ECFA is signed. This is why it’s essential for us to create this monitoring group, as these issues will have an impact on the future of Taiwanese society,” he said.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) said afterwards that it respected the formation of the group, with DPP spokesperson Tsai Chi-chang (蔡其昌) adding that “we will continue to hear different voices from Taiwanese society on the government’s mishandling of how the ECFA was signed.”

The DPP also vowed to step up its monitoring of the ECFA as the legislature moves to validate the agreement this month.

According to the DPP spokesperson, DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) had asked that DPP lawmakers question the government’s lack of transparency during the negotiation process.

Opposition to the deal is focused on concerns that tariff-free access to Chinese goods could undermine Taiwan’s more fragile industries and freeze Taiwanese wages while closer cross-strait economic ties could result in Taiwan being locked into a “one China” framework.

Speaking alongside Lai, Taiwan Labor Front director Chang Feng-yi (張豐益) said Taiwanese workers were still unsure as to how they would be affected by the agreement, because

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negotiations took place under wraps.

Another member of the alliance, Tsai Chi-hsun (蔡奇孫), secretary-general of the Taiwan Association for Human Rights, said that while President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration has engaged in numerous talks with China, most people still did not understand what exactly had been discussed.

"The public remains confused over the contents of the -negotiations and Taiwan's democratic values have declined in the past two years," he said.

The alliance, which has drawn support from 25 organizations, plans to hold its first official meeting on July 10.

In the meantime, organizers said they would hold a public meeting on Monday morning, inviting members of the public to share their opinions on how lawmakers should review the ECFA.

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