

Protesters demand full review of ECFA

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Dozens of demonstrators yesterday staged a protest outside the legislature to demand that lawmakers stringently review the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) that Taiwan and China signed on Tuesday.

Wearing T-shirts with the inscription “the people are the masters” and billing themselves as a non-violent protest group, the group silently marched around the building holding placards reading “an ECFA referendum is a basic human right.”

“It’s difficult for us to believe how the [Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT)]-dominated legislature can stand up for public interests when it reviews and monitors the ECFA,” said Cheng Li-chun (程力群), an executive director at the People Sovereignty Action Network, which organized the rally.

“We want the arguments over the ECFA to be settled by the Taiwanese public and democratically so,” she said.

The ECFA, which will lower cross-strait trade barriers and customs tariffs, was signed in the Chinese city of Chongqing despite heavy protests by opposition parties and a number of pro-independence groups last week.

Lawmakers must approve the trade pact before it can become valid. Both the KMT and the -Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) caucuses have proposed calling a provisional session on Wednesday to screen and finalize the ECFA.

The KMT caucus hopes the agreement will be debated and passed as a single package, without having to approve it clause by clause — a move that has drawn heavy opposition from both yesterday’s protesters and DPP lawmakers.

The DPP said the ECFA document should be subject to the same legislative screening as other bills.

“Despite our small numbers, we will not let the government pass the ECFA review easily ... we will fight this to the end,” DPP Legislator Liu Chien-kuo (劉建國) said in the legislature on Saturday.

These calls were repeated by the 90 protesters, who wore straw hats to protect themselves in the heat as the temperature reached 37°C. The group first gathered at the 228 Peace Park in the morning before heading to the legislature across the street.

During the 0.5km walk, the protesters, most middle-aged and above, occasionally broke into a song with one line of lyrics: “I love Taiwan.”

“I’m very worried that this ECFA, if approved, will take away Taiwan’s sovereignty and move our country closer to China,” an elderly protester surnamed Lee said.

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“The ECFA could eventually make Taiwan part of China, like Hong Kong and Macau,” another protester said.

Speaking during the march, Cheng said that because the ECFA prompted so much controversy, the Referendum Review Committee should have agreed last month to public demands to hold a nationwide plebiscite on the issue.

The committee rejected two proposals — one by the DPP and another by the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) — that would have asked voters whether they agreed with the government’s move to sign the ECFA. The 21-member committee based its decisions on “problems” with the wording of the question and the content of the proposals.

A third proposal, also by the TSU, is currently under review.

The failed bids show how the review committee and the Referendum Act (公投法) place unfair limits on democracy, said Chung Chia-pin (鍾嘉彬), another official at the action network.

“It’s a birdcage law that restricts the basic human rights,” he said. “It’s extremely unreasonable and it needs to be revised.”

Standing in front of the crowd, he later opened up a cardboard box containing six pigeons and said their release represented the aspirations of Taiwanese.

“We call on the legislature ... to first break the birdcage referendum law, revise the referendum law and then review the ECFA,” he said.

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