

FRANK CHING: Another push for Chen's Taiwan agenda

By FRANK CHING

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WITH only five months left to his presidency, Chen Shui-bian is being visibly isolated as he continues to push the envelope of Taiwan independence in a bid to gain votes for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party in the upcoming legislative and presidential elections early next year. The United States, the guarantor of Taiwan's security, has been unhappy with his provocative pushing of his pro-independence agenda, which will culminate in a referendum next March -- coinciding with the election of the president -- on the island's application to join the United Nations, a move viewed by both Beijing and Washington as an attempt to change the cross-Strait status quo and to change its official name from the "Republic of China" to "Taiwan."

Raymond F. Burghardt, chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan, the "unofficial" US body that handles relations with Taiwan, reiterated last week Washington's opposition to the referendum which, he said, had already raised tensions across the strait.

In addition, he said, the referendum would deprive whoever is elected president of a free hand to manage relations with China. Frank Hsieh, the DPP candidate, is running against Ma Ying-jeou of the opposition Kuomintang.

"The new president, whether it's Hsieh or Ma... he deserves to be his own man," Burghardt said. "He shouldn't be boxed in by statements made now."

And yet, of course, that is exactly what Chen is trying to do, ensuring that whoever succeeds him will not be able to undo what he has put in place.

That is why, among other things, he is closing down the mausoleums of the late presidents Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo on Jan 1, when military guards will be removed.

That will happen 11 days before crucial parliamentary elections are scheduled. Both Chiangs were leaders of the KMT and the senior Chiang, in particular, is vilified as a dictator who engaged in "white terror" against the Taiwanese.

A DPP-initiated referendum is also scheduled for Jan 12 calling on the KMT to turn over "illicit party assets", another move to motivate the DPP base to come out and vote.

Hsieh, who has been in the president's shadow, finding it difficult to conduct his own campaign, immediately welcomed the Burghardt remarks, calling them heartening.

He said the US is a good friend of Taiwan's and "one should listen to the advice of a good friend".

Meanwhile, former president Lee Teng-hui, who had supported Chen for re-election in 2004, publicly said he had made a mistake and urged Taiwanese to oust the ruling DPP from office.

"We chose the wrong person, and we have been punished," Lee reportedly told the United Daily News. "I have never seen any other country like Taiwan where more than 10 ministers have been arrested on charges of graft in less than eight years."

In addition, Chen's wife, Wu Shu-chen, is being charged with illegally claiming about US\$458,000 (RM1.5 million) in personal expenses from state funds, which were used to buy diamond rings and other luxury items.

Lee, who served as president from 1988 to 2000, warned that if Taiwanese keep voting for the DPP then the country would be finished.

As a result of Chen's repeated rejection of US President George W. Bush's pleas not to engage in provocative behaviour, the Bush administration, which entered office as a big booster of Taiwan, is now one of its most severe critics.

Perhaps reflecting the Bush administration's attitude, a recent survey by Zogby International commissioned by the Committee of 100, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organisation made up of Chinese American leaders and professionals, found that only 32 per cent of American citizens said the US military should protect Taiwan if China started an armed conflict.

In fact, a majority of respondents said they would oppose US intervention in the event of a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait if it was triggered by a formal declaration of independence by Taiwan, according to the survey.

The percentage of those who were in favour of the US taking military action in support of Taiwan showed a drop of 20 percentage points compared to a similar poll taken in 2005.

Although Chen appears to have been deserted by friends and allies both in Taiwan and abroad, no one is counting him out.

After all, in 2004, he appeared headed for certain defeat until a mysterious shooting incident the night before the election brought him a flurry of sympathy votes, enabling him to squeak through. He is a master politician, possibly with more tricks up his sleeve.