

# Civic virtue key to more engagement for reform

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At a recent press conference, a journalist asked me: “How would you convince an ordinary person busy making a living that constitutional reform is relevant to them?”

This is indeed an important question. This time, constitutional reform requires more public attention and participation, but constitutional construction itself is not an easily accessible art. It is very difficult to make people leave their daily lives behind and pursue the most fundamental part of constitutional self-rule — writing, or amending, a constitution.

The last stage of constitutional reform is a referendum, but this does not mean that public participation is restricted to approving of a constitutional amendment that has been discussed, planned and arranged by leaders and elites. Indeed, allowing a degree of public participation in the formation of a constitutional amendment increases the likelihood that the amendment of a referendum is approved, but that is not the only reason for encouraging public participation in constitutional reform.

Constitutional reform requires very strong political momentum. A look at the current constitutional and political situation in Taiwan tells us without a doubt that mainstream opinion is the main source driving constitutional reform.

The strength of public support for such reform affects the scope of the issue and how far-reaching the changes are to be and, on the other hand, the speed of the process. There is no need for us to be so suspicious of politicians trickery or calculations. If civil society has a strong political will to initiate and participate in constitutional reform, such reform does not

become a bogus issue or become decided by an elite.

The question is how we should go about mobilizing the public, who normally only show up on voting day, and give them the required motivation to pay attention to and actively participate in constitutional amendment debates and campaigns.

Telling people concretely where the “beef” is in constitutional reform is probably not an effective strategy. As they measure their benefits and disadvantages, most people are likely to simply jump on the bandwagon.

Under these circumstances, all we can do is to call on them to express their “civic virtue,” the noblest virtue in a republic. If every person is willing to make goodness and justice in this constitution his or her own responsibility, then any change to the nation’s constitutional system is his or her business.

When the public is willing to take the time required to follow and understand the issues involved in constitutional reform, and to actively participate in public deliberation of such reform, they transform from being just “ordinary citizens” participating in regular politics to “constitutional citizens” participating in constitutional politics. It is only when a substantial proportion of the public starts to experience this kind of transformation that the “constitutional moment” that many commentators have been hoping for would possess the historical weight required to surpass and reconstruct normal politics, instead of simply being a byword for the constitutional reform process.

There are many different reasons for adopting a “none-of-my-business” attitude, but if you are willing to take responsibility as a “constitutional citizen,” constitutional reform becomes your business.

With your participation, the reform process is further blessed by your noble virtue. It seems that many citizens have already decided to support and pay attention to the reform. How about you?

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