

Chen's promises already broken

By Hwang Jyh-Dean

2000.06.05 Taipei Times

Many of Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) "political checks" -- that is, the promises he made during his presidential campaign -- technically speaking bounced before he took office. Chen should be worrying about how to make good on his promises provided that he is a politician who keeps his promises. His campaign promises are all-encompassing. The following is an incomplete list of them:

1. Opening the market to foreign capital before June;
2. Shortening of workweek to 44 hours by year's end;
3. Implementation of the "333 Family Welfare program" (安家福利專案);
4. Implementation of the "555 Family-care program" (555 安親照顧方案) which encompasses provisions for both child and senior care;
5. Tax exemptions for residents of offshore islands;
6. No tax hikes;
7. The imposition of a security transaction tax;
8. Placing Taipei County and Taichung County and city under the direct jurisdiction of the central government;
10. Merging the Taichung Harbor and city districts;
11. Lowering the voting age to 18; and

12 Clarifying Taiwan's national borders in the Constitution.

Chen's staff was busy finding ways to save him from the embarrassment of having "bounced checks" even before his inauguration. Their excuse was that all policies must be prioritized in terms of feasibility, and not all promises should be taken seriously. Ironically, many academics credited as "clean" elements of our society, who had helped Chen write his "checks" are now also the ones coming up with these excuses for him.

Two checks are to be due soon: opening the domestic market to foreign capital and reducing the workweek to 44 hours.

Opening the market to foreign capital -- initially scheduled for the end of 2000 -- was a policy of the former government. To distinguish itself from the former government during the campaign, Chen's camp moved the original schedule ahead by six months. However, as soon as Chen was elected, those who drafted his campaign platforms immediately said there was no need to move the schedule ahead, since it was a policy set by the former government. Nothing was wrong with the remark itself. But if there was no need to move the schedule in the first place, why propose it during the campaign?

Chen vowed to keep his promises about cutting the workweek to 44 hours by year's end, and to 40 hours by 2002. After winning the election, Chen publicly promised labor groups that the check will not bounce. However, in a "freshman training program" for the new ministry heads early in May, the promise was deftly rephrased as "cutting the work week from 48 to 44 hours within two years."

In view of the chain of events, predictably more than two of the checks mentioned above will bounce in the future. It is not surprising that Chen is failing to deliver his campaign promises, since political figures rarely make good on their promises. What is surprising is that Chen's promises should fail so soon. What's even more surprising is that the academics who helped him make campaign promises immediately found excuses for the bounced checks.

Let's think about what kind of hope, happiness, and "elevation" we can get out of such a "government for all the people" (全民政府) and "rule by the clean and upright" (清流共治).