

## Students speak out on gov't protests

March 23, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Fridays now bring me into contact with two groups of students, one meeting in the morning, and the other at night. I've been curious all week how these students feel about their peers "occupying" the legislature. About 48 hours ago, I invited them to respond anonymously to an anecdotal survey for this column. The morning class (studying European literature) included students from their sophomore to senior years. The evening group (American Literature Part II) was composed almost totally of seniors.

I absented myself from the room while the students took the survey and turned in their comments.

The first question was "How informed are you about this news event?" Nearly half of the morning students (23 of 51) either did not participate in the survey, or invalidated the rest of the survey for themselves by their admission they knew little about the demonstration. This situation was amazingly similar among the night students, with 22 of 45 not participating, or admitting they did not know enough to respond. Surely these figures, which indicate astonishing passivity about an important current event involving the students' own age group, warrant concern.

Next question: "Do the students have a right to protest in this way against the government's handling of the proposed trade agreement?" Overall, informed morning students strongly approved. "Yes," said 20 of 28, "No" 3, with 5 "unsure." The evening students showed themselves similarly divided. "Yes," said 18 of 23, "No" 3, and 2 "unsure."

"Legally, the students are in the wrong, but I feel they have every right to protest," commented one student. "Seizing and occupying the legislative 'yuan' is the most effective move to get the nation's attention. [It's] a means to begin a discussion."

A clear "No" came from another voice. "Taiwanese reject the idea of trading internationally to avoid defeat in business. If we offer good quality and creativity to run a business, why are we afraid of transactions with other countries?"

A junior in the morning shared a view that reflects my own opinion (which no one heard, because I didn't express it.) "It's not good to go in there and destroy tables, microphones and other things. It may however have been the only way to make the government know it cannot do things like that. I hope the students will be rational rather than emotional. The occupation raises public attention to the issue."

The questions that followed offered an opportunity to speak out. I asked, "What advice would you now give President Ma and leaders of the two major parties?" A junior advised the president, "Give a persuasive explanation of why you want to sign the contract . . . Help people know the benefits, but also the flaws. If necessary, sign the contract on your own will. Don't consider too strongly the blind rejection of the Taiwanese." (My comment – How does such a view fit the spirit of democracy?)

One respondent distinguished between apology and explanation. "We don't need you to apologize, President Ma. We need you to tell us the reasons for making these decisions." From a sophomore: "You did wrong in approving the agreement. You should have let people know the content . . . so we can understand how it may influence our future life." A classmate wrote, "Nothing should be hidden from us. If it is beneficial, prove it!" Another: "It is wrong for the president and government to rush into the agreement while ignoring the people's voice." Another said the government got the bill through "without listening to the citizens." Still another: "I have nothing to say to this ridiculous government." Voices from the night students – "Let the citizens themselves vote yes or no directly," and "I am disappointed in the president. I regret voting for him."

As for advice for the student protestors, one respondent wrote, "Thanks for putting yourself out there and standing up for your beliefs . . . but don't shoot yourselves in the foot by destroying property, acting violently, or drinking beer." One supporter urged perseverance: "I hope you will stick to your goals, staying united to change whatever you believe is wrong." (*Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.*)

### **Talking points :**

1. Seven days after its beginning, the students' OCCUPATION of the Legislature continues to be the leading news story in Taiwan. Whether or not you agree with what the students are doing, SHOULD students involve themselves sometimes in politics? YES ; . . . NO . . . NOT SURE
2. This column focuses on what some Fu da students would like to say to the student protestors, and to President Ma and other high political leaders. Is there something you would YOU like to say to them?
3. A survey in this column tracked student opinions on the OCCUPATION of the legislature. Of the approximately 90 students in the survey, about 45 students said they knew nothing or very little about this news story or that they did not want to comment. One half of the people in a group this large is a lot of people. What does this statistic suggest to us?

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