



## Taiwan's 2016 Elections: Out with the Old Status Quo, In with the New Status Quo

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As expected, the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP, 民主進步黨) Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) won the Taiwanese presidential elections. More surprisingly, the DPP also swept the Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院) elections, a first. During earlier DPP administrations from 2000 to 2008, the Kuomintang (KMT, 中國國民黨) had continued to hold sway in the LY. The Tsai-Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁) ticket received 6,894,744 votes (56.12%), defeating the Kuomintang candidates Eric Chu Liluan (朱立倫) and Wang Ju-hsuan (王如玄), with 3,813,365 (31.04%), and the People First Party's (親民黨) James Soong (宋楚瑜) and Hsu Hsin-ying (徐欣瑩), with 1,576,861 (12.83%) (Central Election Commission 2016a).

In the LY elections, the DPP won 68 seats of the 113 total seats and the Kuomintang 35,

while the New Power Party (時代力量) won five seats, the People First Party three, and the Non-Partisan Solidarity Union (無黨團結聯盟) one. An independent candidate was also elected (Hsiao 2016).

The DPP's legislative majority will be an opportunity for Tsai to implement the necessary economic reforms to revive the Taiwanese economy. It might also turn out to be the crucial factor in the distance that the DPP under Tsai will go to promote Taiwan's turn away from the mainland and the expansion of the island nation's international space. Some military reforms and expansion might also be on the cards while lowering Taiwan's profile on the South China Sea disputes. Taiwan's military profile vis-à-vis the mainland has, in fact, degraded over time (Mizokami 2014) and its 2015 National Defence Report suggests that China is likely to have the military

capability to take over the island by force by 2020 (Channel NewsAsia 2015).

## Highlights

The KMT's rout in the 9-in-1 local government elections in November 2014 was the first inkling of a swing against the ruling party. The victory margin in the 2016 elections indicates a rejection of incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) perceived pro-China policies and an affirmation of a distinct Taiwanese identity. One editorial in the *Taipei Times*, stated that the KMT subscribed to an 'imperial Chinese ideology' and was 'authoritarian' in nature (Lin 2016; see also *Taipei Times* 2016a), while another pointed out that Ma had 'placed all the nation's eggs in China's basket, making it a lot easier for China to use business to push for political change and economic means to push for unification' (*Taipei Times* 2016b).

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In addition, the KMT was punished for a poor governance record, including the handling of such issues as the death of army corporal Hung Chung-chiu (洪仲丘) in 2013 and the events that led to the Sunflower movement in the spring of 2014 (*Taipei Times* 2016c). The KMT's changing horses mid-stream – switching its presidential candidate from Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) to Eric Chu, the mayor of New Taipei City and the KMT chairman – cannot have helped either.

The perceived inability to put its house in order and the various rifts within the party including Ma's failed attempt to remove KMT rival and speaker of the LY, Wang Jin-pyng (王金平) in 2013 stood in sharp contrast to the DPP's more organized and disciplined approach under Tsai. Hung had, in fact, put herself forward to pressure some of the more serious leaders to run but they remained reluctant until seeing that losing both the presidential and LY elections was a possibility, Chu took over (Bush 2015). Chu's choice of running mate too turned out to be controversial with Wang facing allegations of property speculation, and admitting to profiteering from buying and selling restricted military housing units (*Taiwan News* 2015a, 2015b).

## Voter Turnout

It is to be noted that the voter turnouts at the presidential and legislative elections at 66.2% (Central Election Commission 2016b) was quite low compared to previous elections. In 2012, it was over 74% in both the presidential and LY elections. The low turnout at the presidential elections is part of a declining trend since 2000 but in the case of the LY voter turnout while the 2016 figure is lower than in 2012, has been the highest since the 1998 LY elections (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2016).

These differences in voter turnouts over the years between the two sets of elections appear to tell their own story. It is possible that Taiwanese democracy is maturing and moving from reliance on the executive in the form of one individual serving as president to a more institution- and process-based democracy in which the legislature will be the key arena of democratic politics. This is possibly borne out by the fact that Hualien (花蓮), for instance, which voted for the

KMT in the presidential election, saw the DPP candidate defeat the KMT incumbent for the legislative seat in the latter's traditional stronghold (*China Times* 2016). Taiwanese voters will possibly have increased expectations of their legislators than ever before. This might well be the result of the events that triggered the Sunflower Movement in March 2014 which the KMT-dominated LY tried to rush through a trade deal with China without adequate review. Taiwanese voters appear to have sent a clear message against any repeat of the lack of due process and democratic accountability evident in that instance.

Despite her huge victory, Tsai Ing-wen, must keep the message of the turnouts in mind. At the same time, the Taiwanese voters might well have also strengthened her hand. Now, no matter what the pressures on her from China or other external powers, the LY if it is responsible to its mandate will also be a bulwark against such pressure.

## The Economy

President-elect Tsai's most urgent task will be the revival of the faltering Taiwanese economy. In fact, a *Global Times* editorial declared that the DPP would find it impossible to revive Taiwan's 'stagnant economy' (*Global Times* 2016). The implicit assumption is that it is through good ties with the mainland that Taiwan's economy had its best hope. This is pretty much true at least in the short term. The Taiwanese economy is heavily tied to the Chinese economy and will take time to diversify, if ever that is an intention.

The intention might well exist for the DPP leadership but Taiwan's corporate conservatism as well as bureaucratic inertia might work against building ties with other economies at the expense of China.

Meanwhile, the *Huanqiu Shibao* (环球时报) in the Chinese version of the same article is more direct in pointing out that Taiwan would find it difficult to break away given the economic relationship (*Huanqiu Shibao* 2016).

## The PRC: Impact and Reactions

While there were reports and editorials on the Taiwan elections, on 16 January itself, the PRC media was not surprisingly dominated by the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in Beijing (Jackson 2016).

The aforementioned *Global Times* editorial pointedly stated in its headline, 'Taiwanese choose Tsai, not independence'. However, in needing to stress 'not independence', Chinese anxieties are clear (see *Xinhua* 2016a). It noted that learning from her 2012 defeat, Tsai chose both during the campaign and in her victory speech, to remain vague on cross-Straits ties. Simultaneously, it credited the KMT's 'contributions to the current stage of cross-Straits relations', calling it 'a performance that merits recognition both in Taiwan and the mainland'.

*Taiwanese democracy is moving from reliance on the executive to one in which the legislature will be the key arena of politics.*

The DPP, meanwhile, had 'the responsibility of... avoiding creating trouble for cross-Straits relations like it did as an opposition party'. It also noted that Tsai's not accepting of the so-called 1992 Consensus 'casts a cloud over cross-Straits' ties (*Global Times*

2016). This position conveniently forgets that the PRC/CPC perhaps had much to do with undermining the 1992 Consensus by laying stress on ‘one China’ rather than on its ‘different interpretations’ by the two sides.

An election eve op-ed in the same publication by the dean of the Taiwan Research Institute of Xiamen University focused only economic issues in Taiwan, including its falling exports and youth unemployment and suggested that ‘economic woes have squeezed the KMT's room for victory in the upcoming election’. While he acknowledged that Tsai would likely win, he did his best to dismiss her calling the KMT candidate ‘a man of integrity’ and one possessing ‘richer economic and administrative experience’ than Tsai.

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Alongside Taiwan’s democracy and political parties were described as unsatisfactory. Astoundingly, and in the face of recent evidence to the contrary, the author stated that the ‘one country, two systems’ had been applied ‘successfully’ in Hong Kong and Macao, and would be ‘more flexible’ in Taiwan. Trying to shield the mainland’s unification project, the author also suggested that ‘the compelling issue is not unification but mutual trust’ between the DPP and CPC (Liu 2016).

Tsai herself has stated that she will ‘maintain the status quo’. However, the content of the status quo is something that

both sides see differently. What is more, a distinct Taiwanese identity has emerged and solidified over the years. The election results indicate that references to ethnic unity and Chinese nationalism at Xi Jinping’s meeting with Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore in November last year found little traction among Taiwanese voters.

China’s official news agency, Xinhua (新華社), appeared to acknowledge the growth of a distinct Taiwanese identity by pointing to ‘mentality of the young’ as one of the ‘most decisive’ factors in the results (*Xinhua* 2016b). Similarly, a spokesman of the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office stated, ‘We hope young people across the Strait can promote mutual understanding... and deepen correct knowledge of cross-Strait relations’ (*People’s Daily* 2016). Nevertheless, Xinhua could not help but try to defend China’s policy towards the island by saying, ‘Instead of being a failure, the mainland’s cross-Strait policies, which encourage peaceful ties across the Strait, have guided Taiwan’s public opinion that people dare not, cannot and do not want to seek independence’ (*Xinhua* 2016b).

The ‘one country, two systems’ concept has also been largely discredited on the island given goings-on in Hong Kong of late. In such a situation, the CPC will find it difficult to politically reconcile Taiwan to the mainland. The main approaches therefore are likely to be of economic blandishments even as China seeks to intervene directly or indirectly through political parties or politicians and corporate interests sympathetic to Beijing. Attempts are also likely to be made once again to curb Taiwan’s room on the international stage.

That said, the CPC could well seek secret channels to talk to the DPP including in the intervening period between now and May

when Tsai is actually sworn in as president (Paal 2015). Beijing also has an interest in not drawing fresh American and world attention to its neighbourhood or criticism of China when there are already problems it has involving the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

## Impact on Taiwan's International Activity and Space

It was a Chinese attempt to limit Taiwan's international space that might have added to the DPP's kitty of votes during the elections. Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜), a teenage Taiwanese member of a South Korean pop band was criticised for displaying a flag of the ROC on a television show, losing an endorsement deal from Chinese telecom major Huawei in the process. Ironically, her first prominent critic was a Taiwan-born singer, Huang An (黄安), who is now resident in Beijing (Focus Taiwan 2016b), but it was China's angry netizens that blew up the issue.

Chou was subsequently forced to apologize in Chinese on video (Herman 2016) most probably by her Korean managers. The Chou apology video caused much anger in Taiwan with leaders of all political parties stating that she had nothing to apologise for (*Focus Taiwan*. 2016c; see also, Taiwan DPP Mission in the U.S. 2016). Some have viewed the impact of the Chou video in this election as possibly greater than that of the *zidan* (bullet) referring to the mysterious assassination attempt on Taiwanese president and DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) on the eve of the 2004 presidential election and which is believed to have swung him the election in a narrow victory.

In any case, such Chinese opposition to the display of the ROC flag including at the

official level is not new. For instance, the ROC flag pin on President Ma Ying-jeou's suit was blurred by official Chinese television during the Ma-Xi meeting in Singapore in November 2015 (Wong 2015). While the DPP might attempt to amend this state of affairs, it also faces the renewed prospect of China wooing and winning over the few diplomatic allies that Taiwan has left. Under the KMT, the Chinese had more or less desisted from trying to constrain Taiwan's international space including its participation in international organizations but the DPP has been threatened already that China could 'snatch away' (夺走, *duozou*) Taiwan's diplomatic allies which would make it difficult for Taiwan's MOFA to maintain its 'national honour' (国家尊严, *guojia zunyan*) (Huanqiu Shibao 2016).

*China is likely return to a policy of curbing Taiwan's room on the international stage.*

Meanwhile, the US has continued a tradition of sending a former senior official – in this case former Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns – to Taiwan to convey official felicitations to the winner of the elections and its interest in peace across the Taiwan Strait. Simultaneously, however, Washington also sent as part of a trip to Asia, the serving Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Beijing where he held talks also with Zhang Zhijun, head of the Taiwan Affairs Office (*Focus Taiwan* 2016a; *Taiwan News* 2016).

The US will, on the whole, not be as concerned about Taipei taking a radical turn towards independence under Tsai's watch as it might have been during the Chen Shui-bian years. After not giving its endorsement to Tsai during her first shot at the presidency in 2012, Washington did so this time around.

## Conclusion

All told however, it looks unlikely that there are going to be major departures in Chinese or American policy towards Taiwan nor does it seem possible despite the change of ruling party that Taiwan can do anything substantially more in the international domain than what it has already been doing. This last has involved simply trying to maintain its current space and to attempt to increase its presence in regional and world bodies incrementally.

The Taiwanese economy's deep dependence on a slowing China also presents the same set of domestic economic challenges to the incoming DPP administration that the KMT had trouble.

For Taiwan, it would appear that the status quo has only changed colour. ■

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