

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*DPP-KMT Contestation
over the Nature of
Relations with China:
Domestic Dynamics and
the Challenges from the
PRC*

REPORT

Speaker :

Courtney Donovan Smith

16 February 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This special lecture by Mr. Courtney Donovan Smith held in the aftermath of the recent presidential elections in Taiwan, addressed the intricate dynamics among various political parties regarding their distinct perspectives on relations with the PRC. The speaker noted that throughout the electoral campaign, the KMT and the DPP, advocating closer ties with PRC and upholding Taiwanese sovereignty respectively, engaged in a heated debate over the direction of the relations.
- Mr. Smith observed how the DPP and the KMT project their respective concerns regarding Cross-Strait relations. This, in his view, greatly influences the voting habits of Taiwanese citizens. The speaker further argued that the voters supported the KMT in local elections, while they favoured the DPP in the national elections.
- The speaker also noted that the DPP's third term may not witness a major shift from earlier policies, especially regarding Cross-Strait relations. In line with DPP policies, Mr. Smith posited, any alteration in the *status quo* would emerge from Mainland China.
- Highlighting the relevance of the elections, the Chair Dr. Yelery stated that multi-party democracy in Taiwan is rapidly growing. Beyond the primarily binary contestation between the DPP- and the KMT, the emergence of the TPP and its increasing electoral base is likely to play a significant role in shaping Taiwanese politics.

REPORT

DPP-KMT CONTESTATION OVER THE NATURE OF RELATIONS WITH CHINA: DOMESTIC DYNAMICS AND THE CHALLENGES FROM THE PRC

Speaker: Courtney Donovan Smith, Columnist, *Taiwan News*, Co-Founder, Editor and Host, *Taiwan Report*; and Co-Publisher, *Compass Magazine*, Taiwan.

Chair: Aravind Yelery, Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi

Date: 16 February 2024

Venue: Zoom Webinar

Dr. Aravind Yelery inaugurated the session by providing a background to the theme of the seminar. He stated that the recent election campaigns by the contesting political parties in Taiwan raised several important aspects, including matters pertaining to Taiwanese sovereignty, relations with China, the US, and other nations. Noting the relevance of an unprecedented third presidential term for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Dr. Yelery also highlighted the close competition presented by the KMT. Furthermore, the emergence of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), and its performance in the election campaigns, has resulted in a new phase in Taiwanese politics.

The positions adopted during the campaign suggest a firming of perspectives on national security across the political spectrum, although disagreements persist among the parties regarding the question of national sovereignty. Despite the victory of the DPP in the elections, the overall result was disappointing for all three parties. Even so, by voting the ruling DPP to the presidency for an unprecedented third term, voters demonstrated their commitment to safeguarding Taiwan's

sovereignty and endorsing President Tsai Ing-wen's successful endeavours in international diplomacy. The President-Elect, and current Vice-President, Lai Ching-te, has displayed his inclination to broadly follow President Tsai Ing-wen's policies further.

Mr. Smith highlighted that the DPP's emphasis on the significance of sovereignty, and their growing wariness of China has positioned them as the focal point in Taiwan's political dynamics. In contrast, the KMT continues to align itself with the 1992 Consensus, challenging the One-China Principle, and advocates for eventual re-unification. Consequently, the DPP's perspective has gained prominence in national politics, especially due to a growing consensus among the young populace regarding their Taiwanese identity.

The recent elections have also revealed fissures in the consensus regarding the trajectory of Taiwan's domestic verities and international relations. There exists a section of the population which supports the DPP's perspective on Taiwan's sovereignty, yet it desires the KMT to oversee certain aspects, especially regarding relations with China. In recent years, the KMT's stance toward the PRC, which has been comparatively softer than that of the DPP, has appealed to certain sections of the Taiwanese public. This has been most common among Taiwanese businesses which have assets and trade relations on the mainland. Interestingly, the DPP's performance within the ambit of local elections has been less than favourable, as noted by Mr. Smith. In the most recent local elections in 2022, the DPP faced its worst defeat in its history. The KMT, on the other hand, has been doing comparatively better within the fold of local elections. According to the speaker, this is essentially how the dynamic has been playing out since 2016.

Mr. Smith argued that in the context of the discussions about Cross-Strait relations, the DPP's policies are unlikely to alter the status quo. Changes, if any, would likely originate from the Chinese side. Furthermore, Cross-Strait relations are not anticipated to undergo significant transformations in the medium term.

In the discussions that followed, there was a query regarding the voting preferences of young Taiwanese. Mr. Smith argued that the younger generation has expressed concerns about the current economic state and living standards. In signaling this interest to their respective candidates, young voters have found that the programmes presented by these candidates, from different parties, share remarkable similarities with only a few minor adjustments. Beyond this, matters of national sovereignty, and Cross-Strait relations also play a key role in deciding voting preferences.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Yelery stated that multiparty democracy is beginning to take shape in Taiwan, and special attention must be paid to its evolution and growth. The emergence of the TPP as a close competitor has challenged the hitherto dichotomous nature of politics in Taiwan. The DPP and the KMT, with their respective stances on relations with China, will have to involve themselves further with local politics. The emerging multiparty dynamics in Taiwan will yield several interesting studies as well in the long term.

This report was prepared by Bhagyashree Nimbalkar, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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