



ASIAPACIFIC Bulletin

Number 9
January 22, 2008

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ANALYSIS

TAIWAN'S 2008 LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS: DPP'S PAIN IS U.S. AND PRC'S GAIN

Denny Roy

The Taiwan legislative election on January 12 was another serious blow to the legacy of President Chen Shui-bian, who took responsibility for the electoral defeat and resigned his position as chairman of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), saying "I feel really apologetic and shamed." Chen's prestige has already suffered recently from low public approval ratings, the indictment of his wife and son-in-law on corruption charges—and the prospect that he faces similar prosecution when he leaves office—and a public rebuke from high-ranking U.S. officials over the referendum to be held in conjunction with Taiwan's presidential election in March.

The election saw the opposition Kuomintang (Nationalist Party; KMT), the largest of the "Blue" parties that favor Taiwan preserving its symbolic ties to China, win 81 seats against only 27 for the DPP, whose platform says Taiwan is an independent and sovereign country. It was a stunning setback for the DPP. Chen and other party leaders did not expect to control the new legislature. They announced before the election their goal was 50 seats, which would have denied the pan-Blue the two-thirds majority needed to pass most proposed laws. Now, the KMT has enough votes even to impeach the president, and with the support of a few more Blue-oriented legislators it could achieve the three-quarters majority required to pass a constitutional amendment.

The results were largely a protest vote against the DPP, reflecting widespread public dissatisfaction with Chen's policies as well as the prevailing sense that Taiwan's governance is stagnant and mired in corruption. Chen's personal unpopularity was also a major contributing factor; the proportion of the electorate he has alienated—either because his leadership is seen as ineffective, because he is either too tough or not tough enough on China, or because of his family graft scandal—has grown steadily. To a considerable degree, these considerations transcended the ethnic divide that is a persistent feature of Taiwan politics. Although cross-Strait policy was an undercurrent, this legislative contest was principally about the local and domestic concerns of voters and about their feelings toward individual candidates. In Taiwan, the personae of candidates tend to carry more weight with voters than programmatic inter-party differences.

In 2005, Taiwan's government passed a constitutional amendment reducing the size of the Legislative Yuan from 225 seats to 113 to make the body more efficient and to decrease the influence of small parties that often espouse extreme viewpoints. This was the first election for the scaled-down legislature.

The KMT apparently benefited from important electoral reforms. Smaller and Taiwan aboriginal communities are over-represented in the reconfigured districts, and these constituencies tend to vote KMT. Even more significant was the change from multiple-

member to single-member districts. The previous system led to KMT (as well as DPP) candidates competing against each other in the same district. With single-member districts, however, that problem is eliminated. The parties support one candidate for each district. This helps the KMT more than the DPP because the older and richer KMT has a superior grassroots campaign infrastructure. In addition to these new structural advantages, the KMT campaigned comparatively well prior to the legislative election, demonstrating unity and an effective use of media.

The new legislature heralds a sea change in Taiwan and perhaps a flurry of new laws beginning this year. The work of the Legislative Yuan has been hampered since Chen's election in 2000 by the division between a DPP-controlled executive branch and continued pan-Blue strength in the legislature. In many cases the pan-Blue's desire to weaken Chen's popularity acted as an incentive for Blue legislators to oppose any measure supported by Chen and the DPP.

The story of the nearly completed Chen presidency is one of feisty pro-independence gestures at the cost of high tensions with China and damaged relations with Taiwan's most important supporter, the United States. Chen has also presided over a lackluster Taiwan economy and a domestic political climate embittered by division between the "Taiwanese" (whose ancestors settled on Taiwan from the 17th to 19th centuries) and the "Mainlanders" (those who came after World War II, and their descendants). Chen's own implication in a corruption scandal was a particular disappointment to supporters who saw him as a break from the often-alleged endemic corruption of the KMT.

The legislative poll gives a further boost to the presidential candidacy of the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou. Prior to the election, Ma already had a substantial lead in most polls over DPP opponent Frank Hsieh. Although identified with Mainlanders, the KMT showed on January 12 that it can get votes from the Taiwanese, who comprise the majority of Taiwan's population.

For the United States, a democratic Taiwan selecting a legislature dominated by a party that favors a more stable cross-strait relationship should be a welcome development. This could be the first step toward the easing of legislative gridlock in Taiwan, potentially leading to a rejuvenated Taiwan economy and trade benefits for the U.S. as well as other Asia Pacific countries. The damage U.S.-Taiwan relations suffered during the Chen years may soon be on the mend. Americans should not assume, however, that a pan-Blue legislature will rush forward with the purchase of weapons systems the U.S. government has offered Taiwan since 2001. Many pan-Blue politicians believe large purchases of expensive U.S.-made armaments are not necessary unless

Taiwan seeks independence, as that would be the only reason China would attack Taiwan. With their strengthened position in the legislature and likely capture of the presidency, the pan-Blue are confident that an era of peaceful cross-strait relations is at hand.

The outcome is a joyous one for the People's Republic of China, which has suffered in frustration through eight years of Taiwan "de-Sinification" under Chen's presidency and now sees the way seemingly clear for a pan-Blue resurgence that will likely go on to capture the presidency in March. The KMT and Ma espouse the "one-China" principle and favor loosening the restrictions on Taiwan's engagement with the mainland. Specifically, Ma favors allowing cross-strait commercial airline flights to complete the "three links" and easing the restrictions on Taiwan businesses that wish to invest in China.

The legislative election brightens the prospect of renewed quasi-official cross-strait political talks, suspended by Beijing since 1999 because of a provocative comment by former President Lee Teng-hui and unfeasible since 2000 because of Chen's refusal to accept "one China" as a precondition.

The legislative electoral result should also provide additional reason for China to keep its cool through the March referenda, one of Chen's final and most provocative independence gestures. In conjunction with the presidential election, the Taiwan government plans to hold a referendum asking voters if they favor applying to join the United Nations under the name "Taiwan." Beijing, which sees all Taiwan referenda as lead-ups to a referendum on independence from China, has expressed especially strong objections to this one, leading to concerns of a looming crisis. The January 12 election, however, should assure the Chinese that the momentum in Taiwan politics is against creeping independence. Two referenda held along with the legislative vote came up well short of the threshold of participation (50 percent of registered voters) required to make them valid, providing further cause to believe the UN referendum will amount to little.

The challenge for Beijing is to avoid jeopardizing the deal by making their preference for Ma over Hsieh an issue in Taiwan's presidential campaign. The less said by the Chinese the better, lest they provide ammunition for opponents of Ma who hope to paint him as the candidate who would sell out Taiwan to China. The same goes for the March referendum. As Chen knew well, belligerent statements from China were priceless endorsements for candidates advocating a hard-line China policy. If the negative spiral of perceived provocations from Taiwan and hostile reactions from China is to be broken, the decisive KMT victory on January 12 may mark the way.