

Taiwan's dual election: democracy and national identity

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The third direct presidential election in the south-east Asian island state of [Taiwan](#) [1] will take place on 20 March 2004. The citizens of Taiwan first voted directly for their own president in 1996, around fifteen years after the country began its gradual transition from authoritarianism to democratic rule – a process marked by the ending of a forty-year period of martial law in 1987.

The [second](#) [2] election, in 2000, brought a major political change with the defeat of the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (“Kuomintang”, or KMT) that had dominated the country since the late 1940s. The election as president of Chen Shui-bian of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) signified the completion of Taiwan’s great democratic transformation begun in the early 1980s.

Now Chen Shui-bian is seeking re-election after a lively campaign marked by intense national interest and popular mobilisation – involving pop stars and [beauty queens](#) [3] as well as civil society organisations and huge, peaceful demonstrations by the respective political parties.

This vibrant democratic experience makes even more shocking an event in the southern city of Tainan on the eve of the campaign when both President Chen Shui-bian and his vice-president, Annette Lu, were shot and wounded by an as yet unidentified [assailant](#) [4]. The immediate reaction among the public seems to suggest that sympathy for the victims, neither of whom are seriously wounded, might translate – especially among younger voters – into increased support for the DPP government in both the election and referendum.

The shooting comes only four weeks after a huge demonstration in which over 1 million Taiwanese linked arms across the length of the entire island of 22 million people. This event was itself both an affirmation of Taiwanese national identity and a commemoration of *the* fundamental moment in modern Taiwanese history: the repressive violence and killing of around 20,000 people by the Kuomintang ruling forces after an incident in the island's capital, Taipei, on 28 February 1947 (“2-28” in Taiwanese historical [memory](#) [5]).

The non-fatal outcome of the 19 March assault means that the incident will not overshadow Taiwan’s subsequent election as did the tragedy in [Madrid](#) [6] a week earlier; but in its way it does confirm a deeper truth about Taiwan: that this is a country in the midst of a complex, contested, often passionate political transition that is challenging and provoking its people to see themselves and their country in new ways.

A dual democratisation

Taiwan’s democratisation process has passed through successive, distinct phases: political liberalisation (1980-1987), democratic opening and transition (1987-1996), and democratic consolidation (1996-2000). Thus, it took about twenty years for Taiwanese society to accomplish the historic feat of establishing the first true democracy in a Chinese world that also includes the

People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong (unified with the PRC in 1997), and Singapore. In the past two decades, the Taiwan experience of democratisation has demonstrated to the world that a new democracy could be created in a Confucian culture that has long been depicted – by its local adherents and outside observers alike – as intrinsically anti-democratic.

The story of modern Taiwan has also proved that a highly active, mobilised civil society [7] with many progressive social movements is essential in facilitating a genuinely democratic culture. These civil society groups played as important a role in pressing for democracy as the political oppositions.

In the end, however, both were needed. Since the 1980s, grassroots social movements and indigenous political oppositions in Taiwan joined forces to develop a historically unprecedented democratic system. In the process they also created something equally significant: a new national identity for Taiwan.

In other words, “democratisation” in Taiwan has a dual meaning. The process involved the deconstruction of an authoritarian regime under the absolute rule of the KMT, one established by ruling elites from the Mainland China party-military-security apparatus exiled to Taiwan after China's civil war in the 1940s. At a deeper level, it also entailed the construction of a new Taiwanese national identity clustered around loyalty to legislative institutions accountable to Taiwan's own people, many of whom were coming to a consciousness of themselves as Taiwanese and not as a mere offshoot of a wider Chinese political community.

A significant effect of this dual democratisation process was to change the ethnic consciousness and politics of Taiwan's different groups: the Min-nanese, Hakka, Mainlander Chinese, and aborigines. The “minority rule” that long prevailed under Mainlander (minority) power elites has shifted to “majority rule” under which these three other, once politically disadvantaged, ethnic groups could gain more equitable access to political power.

Since the 1990s, the minority Mainlander Chinese have no longer monopolised power, and the majority Taiwanese groups have gained more influence. A collective anxiety as well as powerlessness has been tangible among Mainlander Chinese, especially its senior political elites. By contrast, the majority of Taiwanese have experienced a rising collective confidence.

This has subtly altered the dynamic of ethnic mobilisation in the political arena and in national elections in recent years. Under authoritarian rule, political mobilisation of resentful, marginalised ethnic Taiwanese was a common and effective practice used by their political oppositions to challenge the KMT regime. In recent years, the defeated KMT politicians exploited “in reverse” the ethnic mobilisation of the frustrated Mainlander Chinese. The 2004 presidential election campaign has seen a recurrence of such ethnic mobilisation.

The China factor

The dual democratisation process involving the making of a new national identity in Taiwan has had a far-reaching impact on relations between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. In simple terms, the fact that Taiwan's democracy is one of exclusively *Taiwanese* origins itself challenges the old mindset that perceives cross-Straits relations in terms of a “civil war” between the communists and the nationalists of the “old” China. The new democracy established in Taiwan has empowered the citizens to be stakeholders in their government; it has also created a new kind of citizenry conscious of the defined *political* as well as *territorial* boundary of the Taiwanese nation-state vis-a-vis China.

The reaction from China to this democratised Taiwan [8] with its reimagined national identity has been, to put it bluntly, highly resistant and even (to Taiwanese ears) arrogant, especially in its unbending insistence on the “one China” principle. The different logics are clear: China’s thinking and rhetoric implies that the civil war continues, whereas Taiwan has moved far beyond that period.

Despite the increasing economic and trade ties across the Taiwan Straits [9] over recent years, the nature of Taiwan’s democratic transition has helped reinforce uncompromising polarisation between Taipei and Beijing. This “China factor” has played a significant role in Taiwan’s presidential election of 1996 and 2000; the 2004 election has continued the pattern.

Indeed, the referendum on Taiwan’s future cross-Straits policy to be held on election day has made the China factor an even more divisive force between the two domestic political camps. Chen Shui-bian’s DPP has proposed asking two questions about cross-Straits policy and national security in the referendum. Both start from the core assumption that the people of Taiwan want the cross-Straits issue to be resolved through peaceful means.

The first question asks: if China refuses to withdraw its missiles targeted at Taiwan [10] and to clearly renounce the use of force against us, would you agree that the government should acquire more advanced anti-missile weapons to strengthen Taiwan’s self-defense capabilities?

The second question asks: would you agree that our government should engage in negotiation with China on the basis of a framework of peace and stability in order to build consensus and for the well-being of the people on both sides?

The first question relates to self-defense capabilities vis-à-vis China, the second to actual peace negotiation with China. Thus the referendum is both a *defensive* one and a *peace* one: recognising the current situation inherited from past decades while envisaging a future of more open possibilities.

Chen Shui-bian’s political hope is that the referendum will be a means for Taiwan’s citizens to express their collective will in the face of China’s pressure for what it calls “reunification”. Lien Chan of the Kuomintang (KMT) and his running-mate, James Soong of the People First Party (PFP) denounce the referendum as both illegal and unnecessary.

China’s opposition to Chen’s referendum policy is both bitter and predictable. China has even pressured the United States, the European Union, Japan, and south-east Asian governments to express their own objections to Taiwan’s referendum on the grounds it would change the status quo between Taiwan and China.

This reveals a contradiction in China’s policy, for China has always insisted that the so-called “Taiwan issue” is its own domestic matter allowing of no international interference. Yet its complaints about the referendum in the past few months have had the effect of focusing international attention on Taiwan; and the fact that this attention is on Taiwan’s national identity and security, rather than simply on its domestic politics, makes it arguably a way of further emphasising the differences between Taiwan and China.

“China is China, Taiwan is Taiwan”

In this election, it is clear that the future path of Taiwan’s new democracy and its continued reforms is at stake. Pro-democracy activists see the choice between the DPP (the “pan-green camp”) and the old regime alliance of the KMT-PFP (the “pan-blue camp”) as one of progress against regress, stability against instability.

Their argument is as follows. After its 2000 defeat, the KMT-PFP undertook no serious rethinking or self-criticism; its reputation among ordinary citizens of being against democratic reform has continued. In the event of its victory in the 2004 election, strains within the alliance might lead to the opening of a power struggle between Lien's KMT and Soong's PFP, something that could endanger Taiwan's domestic political stability.

Against this, many pro-democracy observers consider that a second mandate for the DPP would give the re-elected government the opportunity to consolidate democratic institutions and advance political and social reforms over the next four years. This, they argue, would also be a positive experience for the world's other new democracies.

In terms of cross-Straits relations, a DPP election victory would entail a clear articulation of the defence of Taiwan's national identity and sovereignty. China will have to come to terms with the fundamental, evolving reality: that China is China, and Taiwan is Taiwan. There might not be an immediate diplomatic breakthrough, but each side will be obliged to understand the other's stance clearly and try to adjust to it in due course.

This line of thought rests on a vital and untested assumption: that of rational political calculation on the side of the People's Republic of China [11].

The election [12] campaign has been closely fought and each side has hopes of victory as it nears its end. Whatever the people's decision, the very complexity of the issues and arguments surrounding the campaign is an inevitable and welcome product of Taiwan's profoundly democratising experience over the past two decades.

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