



Taiwan Election Upset: Now What? by Ralph A. Cossa

Efforts to outguess the voters frequently embarrassed politicians and pundit alike this year. In presidential elections this past spring, incumbents Chen Shui-bian and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo were supposed to be soundly defeated; both won (albeit, in Chen's case, by the slimmest of margins). Conversely, in India, incumbent Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was supposed to win big, but was defeated handily. Even in the United States, many voters went to sleep on election eve confident, as a result of exit poll predictions, that "regime change" had occurred in Washington, only to awake to four more years of the Bush administration.

To Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), I say "welcome to the club." In recent days, newspapers and weekly magazines were filled with commentaries about what President Chen and his pan-green coalition (the DPP plus former President Lee Teng-hui's even more independence-oriented Taiwan Solidarity Union) were going to do following their presumed impending victory. Not so fast! This time it was the pan-blue's turn to squeak out a victory. The Kuomintang/People First Party (KMT/PFP) coalition won 114 seats in the 225-seat LY; its first victory in the past four major elections.

Parties rarely lose (or win) elections based on a single issue or factor, but it seems clear that President Chen's brand of "in your face" politics, which in the past successfully fueled nationalistic sentiments (and votes) backfired this time. While claiming to still honor his pledge not to formally change the Republic of China's name (a de facto declaration of independence and deliberate crossing of a presumed Chinese red line), he has continued to push this envelop, by "informally" substituting Taiwan for the ROC every chance he gets – he even pledged that next year's Quixotic quest to join the United Nations would be under the name Taiwan. While this was likely to cost Taipei votes at the UN, he was banking on it gaining him votes at home. Apparently not!

Many swing voters (and even some DPP supporters) reportedly saw his recent directive that "Taiwan" would henceforth be used instead of "China" in the title of state-owned firms (like China Airlines) as unnecessarily antagonistic; many feared serious economic and political repercussions from Beijing. Meanwhile, Chen's pledge to change the name of Taiwan's overseas missions caught Washington by surprise, causing another public rebuke condemning this "unilateral change in the status quo" (thereby offering the Bush administration a rare opportunity to call someone else a unilateralist).

But, will President Chen see the election as a warning to scale back his confrontational approach? If he chooses not to, the results are pretty easy to predict: continued cross-Strait

tensions, combined with increased economic and political (and perhaps even military) pressure from Beijing; a continued deterioration in Taipei's relations with Washington; and continued political deadlock at home as the KMT flexes its new-found muscles.

What's harder to predict are the consequences if President Chen decides that a kinder, gentler approach is in order. Will Beijing accept the olive branches or dismiss them as "insincere" (its favorite retort)? Will Washington let bygones be bygones? And, will the pan-blue decide to put the interests of Taiwan ahead of its own desire to get even? There is little cause for optimism in all three instances.

The new leadership in Beijing has demonstrated remarkable flexibility and creativity in its approach to many domestic and international issues, but seems locked into its previously unsuccessful "just say no" policy regarding any overture coming from Chen Shui-bian. The election setback opens a window of opportunity to move forward, now that Beijing can rest somewhat easier that no major constitutional change is likely during the remainder of Chen's term in office. But whether or not Chinese President Hu Jintao will be bold enough to put forth a new initiative remains to be seen, as is Chen's willingness to accept such an offer if made.

In 1995, Chen's predecessor, Lee Teng-hui, ignored then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin's Eight Point proposal on Taiwan; a decision many Chinese point to as the beginning of a decade-long steady decline in cross-Strait relations. The upcoming 10th anniversary of that New Year's speech creates an opportunity for Hu to make his own overture. As I (among others) have long suggested, the most feasible solution is a variation of Beijing's current, unacceptable (to Taiwan) "one country, two systems" formulation. What's needed is a "one nation, two states" or "one country, two governments" approach. Ironically, Beijing finds such formulations acceptable when dealing with the other East Asia divided nation situation: the North-South Korean Peninsula divide. The day China is prepared to state that "there is only one China and both the PRC and Taiwan are part of that one China," (as opposed to its current "the Mainland and Taiwan" formulation, the door would be open for significant progress. In the meantime, an essential first step is for Taipei to avoid making matters worse.

As regards Taiwan's relations with the U.S., it is still easy to find staunch Taiwan supporters in Washington, both inside and outside the Bush administration, who remain eager to tell Taiwan what it wants to hear. But the President himself seems increasingly fed up with Chen's antics, witness his public rebuke of Taiwan's leader last December (during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit) and the most recent series of pointed criticisms against Chen's name-change initiatives. (Taipei's assertion that it was merely trying to "avoid creating

confusion in the international community” is seen as an insult to the intelligence of even its most ardent supporters.) The Bush administration came to power convinced that, when it came to cross-Strait tensions, Beijing was the main problem. As its second term begins, this is no longer the case and positive steps, not lame excuses, will be required to restore Washington’s confidence in the DPP leadership.

As regards domestic politics, one would hope that the pan-blue and pan-green leaders would see the upcoming three-year break in major elections as an opportunity to develop a more cooperative approach to governing . . . but I wouldn’t bet large sums of money on it. The impending vote on the \$18 billion arms package will be a test case; will the pan-blue put national security (and its own natural inclinations) first and support an arms package that it would have no doubt pursued had it been in power but no seems intent on blocking just because it can. The sad fact is that, just as the perennial opposition DPP has found it difficult to make the transition from being in the opposition to actually governing (even after five years of practice), it has been even more difficult for the KMT, after 50 years in power, to figure out how to act as a responsible opposition.

(One would hope – but again would be hesitant to bet” that the aging pan-blue leadership would resist the temptation to hang on for one last try for the presidency and instead see this victory as an opportunity to quit while they are finally ahead and turn the party over to the next generation, in order to increase the prospects of prevailing in the 2008 presidential elections.)

In all three instances, it will be up to President Chen to make the first move, by extending olive branches in multiple directions. Those who feared, rightly or wrongly, that a DPP election victory would result in a further deterioration in cross-Strait and trans-Pacific relations and/or the demise of the KMT are no doubt breathing easier today. But those of us hopeful that the election results will open the door for improved cross-Strait relations, renewed trust between Taipei and Washington, and more cooperative, predictable domestic politics on Taiwan remain to be convinced.

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