



Democratic Development in Taiwan: A Model for the PRC? by Bruce J. Dickson

Chen Shui-bian's election last spring as Taiwan's first Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) president was clearly a nightmare scenario for Beijing. Despite saying he wanted to improve relations with Beijing, Chen was the only major candidate who was not formally committed to Taiwan's eventual unification with the Mainland. Chen, along with the people of Taiwan and interested observers around the world, have been watching closely to see how Beijing responds to this turn of events.

Unfortunately, the lessons of Taiwan's democratization for China's political system, and for the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party, has not received nearly as much attention. But the prospects for further political reform in China, whether in the short or long term, have important implications for Taiwan's relationship with China. Chen's victory holds lessons both for China's leaders and for Chinese society in general.

Democracy Means Uncertainty

For the leadership, the first lesson concerns the uncertainty of elections. Although China has been experimenting with village level elections for over a decade, party leaders have been reluctant to extend these elections to higher levels, such as townships and counties. While there have been a few quiet experiments in some urban areas, China's leaders have placed a greater priority on maintaining order, especially in the countryside, than on spreading democracy to higher levels of the political system.

The main obstacle to expanding elections is the fear that the wrong people will win the election. The extent of cadre interference (e.g., overturning unwanted results) is not certain, but it is recognized as wide spread. As in many areas of policy making in China, the attitudes of local officials seem to determine whether new reforms will be enacted in a proper and timely way, even if they have been mandated by the central leadership.

The CCP seems uncomfortable with political processes where it cannot control the outcome. Democracy is an inherently uncertain process. This runs against the grain of the CCP, which is designed to monitor and control all aspects of its environment, not be subject to the whims of public opinion. Chen's victory is a vivid reminder that truly democratic elections are inherently uncertain. For advocates of political reform and democratization in the CCP, their job of convincing skeptics that elections will not sweep them out of power has gotten much harder.

Expanding democratic elections to higher levels would also seem to require the formation of opposition parties. In a

village setting, there is little need for political organizations because most political communication can be done face to face. But as competitive elections move to larger size districts, political parties are indispensable for democratic elections.

Political parties are not the only type of political organization needed for a stable democracy. Also needed is the right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent interest groups. Although China has experienced an explosion of social organizations of all kinds, very few are able to act as true interest groups. The "Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations," finalized in 1998, places sharp limits on the ability to form and operate organizations. Every organization must register with the government and be sponsored by a state organizational unit. In any jurisdiction, there can be only one organization for each profession, activity, or interest. When more than one exist, the state requires them to merge or to disband. Here again, the attitude of local officials is essential. Because it is so unpredictable, it is no substitute for an institutionalized civil society, to which the Chinese government, like most authoritarian governments, remains opposed.

The gradual evolution of an organized opposition in Taiwan points up the sharp differences with China. Like the CCP, the KMT banned the formation of new parties before the democratization of Taiwan's political system. Unlike the CCP, however, the KMT tolerated participation by *dangwai* politicians in local and even national elections, and over time the *dangwai* grew increasingly well organized, at least in the coordination of policy messages during election campaigns and eventually formed the Democratic Progressive Party in 1986. The key points here are: first, a political organization was allowed to exist, even though the KMT tried to constrain its activities and access to the public, and at times even tried to suppress it; second, there was a channel for the political opposition to participate in – local elections and supplemental elections for the Legislative Yuan and National Assembly – so political participation had a legitimate, if limited, outlet other than street protests. The KMT gradually allowed the expansion of organized political activity, creating a more inclusive polity that supported a peaceful democratic transition. The CCP, in contrast, continues to prohibit the political participation by groups who attempt to influence policy, whether through lobbying or protest – an important exception to this general rule is the role of business-oriented associations and groups, but they generally steer clear of political issues. It allows few legitimate channels of participation, creating the risk of instability once political activity does occur. This speaks directly to the CCP's fear of uncertainty.

It Is Not Just the Economy, Stupid

The second lesson for China's leaders concerns the KMT's historic loss of power after governing Taiwan for over 50 years. During that time, it developed a record of economic and political development rightly called the "Taiwan miracle." The KMT's success at implementing growth-oriented policies while improving the level of economic equality challenges the conventional wisdom that rapid growth and equity are not compatible goals for developing countries.

The lesson for CCP leaders must be chilling: this remarkable record of economic and political development was still not enough to keep the KMT in power. Despite remarkable prosperity, Taiwan's voters were ready to make a change, motivated by political issues such as corruption, the involvement of organized crime in politics, and the desire for policies that promote social justice. This may be an illustration of the emergence of post-material values emerging along with rising standards of living. Or, it may simply be voters' dissatisfaction with the status quo and an unresponsive KMT leadership. Either way, the message was the same: the state of the economy does not guarantee success.

The CCP has been basing its legitimacy on its ability to achieve high rates of growth and improved standards of living. The fate of the KMT shows how hollow this strategy is. Taiwan has achieved levels of economic prosperity and democracy that are still decades away in China, and yet the KMT experienced a steady decay in the level of popular support. Taiwan's democratization shows that the legitimacy of a ruling party cannot rest on economic growth alone. Not only does it make the ruling party vulnerable to inevitable economic downturns, but it overlooks the importance of non-economic issues. The CCP will have a difficult time surviving a democratic transition if it stakes its claim on the economy alone.

Democracy Does Not Cure Corruption

The third lesson shows why the economy is not always the most important issue in determining electoral outcomes: democratization by itself does not cure corruption, but it can make it more visible and easier to address. During the authoritarian phase of the KMT's rule, corruption was certainly present. After the democratic transition, however, a new form of corruption emerged that was tied to the election process itself. Vote buying became more common and more costly. The KMT had to give more financial benefits to local factions to win elections, but the leaders of these factions were often notorious. Many of the KMT's elected politicians had criminal records. Public revulsion toward "black gold" was one of the keys to Chen's victory.

Democratization in Taiwan gave rise to a new form of corruption and cleaning it up must be at the top of Chen's domestic agenda. But it has also tarnished the image of Taiwan's democracy by highlighting the close connection between elected officials and organized crime. China is already plagued with rampant corruption; the realization that democracy may compound its problems with a new type of

corruption must be disconcerting to advocates of democratization within China.

Democracy Creates Its Own Supporting Culture

The lessons for China from Taiwan's democratization are not entirely negative, however. For both China's leaders and its citizens, Taiwan's democratization reveals the fallacy of the argument that Chinese culture is not compatible with democracy. This self-serving argument, made by China's leaders to maintain their authoritarian political system, is also a widely held belief in Chinese society as well. So long as people believe their culture is not ready for democracy, they will be less likely to press for democratization or support those who do. Some have also argued that China's Confucian traditions were incompatible with democracy. This pessimistic attitude has placed tremendous inertia on the prospects for democratization.

But Taiwan's democratization shows that democracy can work in the Chinese political culture and that the transition to democracy need not lead inevitably to instability and chaos. The causal relationship between political culture and democracy is not well understood, but Taiwan's case suggests that a democratic culture need not precede democratization. Successful democratization may lay the groundwork for continued success by creating the political culture needed to survive and flourish. This should be the main lesson for Chinese society.

Many mainland Chinese were intrigued by the Taiwan election and seemed to feel that if the people in Taiwan were able to vote for their leaders, they should have the same opportunity. The election, and Taiwan's democratization more generally, does not seem to have created sympathy for Taiwan's perspective in the cross-Strait relationship, but may have earned it some respect for showing a viable alternative to the present reality on the Mainland.

Ironically, Chen's victory may reduce the support for political reform in China within the CCP and delay meaningful democratization. Although Chinese society might be inspired by the example of Taiwan, China's leaders have been reminded that they have much to lose by initiating democratization before their popular support has a stronger foundation than simply economic growth. The outcome of Taiwan's presidential election must be disheartening for them, both concerning the prospects for unification and for their ability to survive the democratization process once it begins.

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