



Two Elections Test Chinese Politics by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

Although Chinese leaders do not face electoral challenges (though some village elections have been organized in the past few years), Beijing will face two crucial electoral tests in the next four months, with possibly critical consequences for regional peace and stability.

In September, Hong Kongers will elect their Legislative Council (or Legco), of which 30 seats are set aside for election through universal suffrage and the other 30 through “functional representation.” In December, Taiwanese go to the polls to choose their next Legislative Yuan (or the new legislature), nine months after they renewed the mandate of President Chen Shui-bian for a second term in March.

These two tests could prove monumental for China, and latest indications do not auger well for Beijing in both elections. China’s fourth-generation leaders could then be tested, especially in reacting to potential losses. They will grapple with China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity at increasingly unsettling times for the Chinese economy and society. The fourth-generation leaders’ coherence as a leadership team would also be tested as their honeymoon period ends; they will face international scrutiny as their internal consolidation of power could be called into question.

The Hong Kong Dilemma

The massive protests for the second year running on July 1, 2004 do not auger well for Beijing’s position and standing in the Hong Kong SAR. More than half a million Hong Kongers filled the streets this year (as in 2003), despite pleas not to turn the 1997 anniversary handover into a day of popular protests against the central government in Beijing.

This year’s “better-than-expected” protest turnout could be attributed to two principal issues. First, Hong Kongers seem intent in booting out Beijing’s prime representative in Hong Kong, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, who has clearly lost the Hong Kong people’s mandate and commands an extremely low level of confidence within the SAR. Recent ministerial resignations and harsh criticisms from Tung’s former assistant, the ever-popular Anson Chan, highlight his problems. It remains to be seen how and when the Beijing government could “sacrifice” Tung in order to obtain some measure of social peace and political acceptance in the SAR.

Second, China probably moved too decisively and harshly on April 6, to the disappointment of many Hong Kongers, when the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) in Beijing “interpreted” Hong Kong’s Basic Law. It stated that it would henceforth be the only body that could decide on the SAR’s political future and its legal perimeters.

Hong Kongers perceived this ruling as Beijing imposing its views and system on the SAR.

These two developments may boost the opposition democrats, who resist Beijing, at the Legco polls. In fact, they could sweep a majority of the 30 “geographical seats,” although pro-Beijing elements would still capture most of the 30 “functional seats,” given that business and other pro-government elements have greater clout there. So far, Beijing’s reconciliatory moves – public discussions and explanations – do not seem to have borne fruit in Hong Kong as the massive “democratic show of force” on July 1 amply showed. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) parade on Aug. 1, the first time that the PLA has shown its strength in the SAR (and also a warning to Taiwan), seemed badly timed, as it probably disquieted many Hong Kongers. It now remains to be seen if Vice President Zheng Zinghong’s last-ditch attempt to convince Hong Kongers in late August can stem the anti-Beijing tide and “save” the Legco elections in September.

The Taiwan Quagmire

The Taiwan political quagmire is of a different nature, though it also augurs badly for China. Beijing’s leaders are preparing for an outcome in which President Chen’s “green supporters” (many of whom advocate the independence of Taiwan from the mainland) would sweep the Legislative Yuan at December polls. Such an eventuality would bolster pro-independence sentiment in Taiwan and embolden advocates to press even harder to break Taiwan away.

Chen’s election by a whisker of 50.11 percent last March (but a clear improvement from his 34 percent in 2000) was an ominous sign that the independence tide could shift the majority in the legislative from the current opposition “pan-blue” KMT-PFP to the Democratic Progressive Party-Taiwan Solidarity Union, and endanger Beijing’s appeals to respect the “one China” policy. This shift appears inevitable as the KMT weakens further amid internal squabbles and the glaring failure of its own leadership to contend with critical yet controversial internal party renewal and rejuvenation. The opposition lacks a credible leader in Lien Chan and James Soong. This internal Taiwanese political quagmire would necessarily weigh down on the Kuomintang-People’s First Party alliance as the controversy over Chen’s ultra-thin victory over Lien appears to be dissipating. Taiwanese public opinion is coming to terms with Chen’s second mandate, just as Lien’s, Soong’s, and their parties’ ratings slip.

China appears to be at a total loss in contending with internal Taiwanese politics, as well as with how best it could win the hearts and minds of 23 million Taiwanese, especially amidst rising Taiwanese nationalism. Threats from Chinese

leaders have not been helpful in binding the Taiwanese any closer to the mainland, and Beijing is beginning to realize the true limits of its economic policy of enticement and “enmeshment” (with the mainland).

China has put pressure on Taiwan’s principal ally, the United States, not to sell arms or bolster nationalistic sentiments on the island. But Chinese leaders also realize the clear limits of Washington’s commitment on the “one China” policy, as tested during strategic talks held with Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Council Advisor Condeleezza Rice earlier this year in Beijing. The PLA’s *Dongshan* war drill as well as the *Hankuang* military games by Taiwan attest to the increasingly tense military situation across the Strait; any U.S. military sales to Taipei could spark renewed nervousness in China.

The Critical Test for Chinese Leaders in Early 2005: Internal Power Consolidation or Struggle?

Beijing’s leaders thus face the prospect of two electoral “failures” by the end of this year. Furthermore, Beijing’s leaders are closely following the U.S. presidential election in November, which could also have a direct impact on Sino-U.S. relations and the Taiwan issue, especially if George W. Bush is re-elected for a second term.

Early 2005 will thus be crucial for Chinese leaders, as they would have to take critical decisions on dealing with Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as Washington. Their “soft approach” has faltered, as Hong Kongers and Taiwanese appear not to be drawn any closer to the mainland, judging from latest indicators; economic enticements and integration may need to be drastically reviewed by Beijing.

Three factors need to be borne in mind in early 2005.

First, peace and security in East Asia could lie squarely in Chinese leaders’ hands as they react to developments in Hong Kong, Taipei, and Washington. Hopefully they would react with care to Beijing’s electoral set-backs, especially when nationalism is mounting in the country.

It would also be prudent for the U.S. and Europe not to fan the flames of protests and defiance too strongly in Hong Kong and Taiwan, so as not to antagonize Beijing.

Second, the peoples of Hong Kong and Taiwan should make their democratic choices with cool heads, without unnecessarily provoking the mainland and pushing it toward conflict.

Finally, there is the danger of a power struggle within the Chinese leadership should things go terribly wrong in both the Hong Kong and Taiwanese elections. The fourth generation could be tested for its cohesiveness, especially since former President Jiang Zemin could use this occasion to challenge President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao over China’s economy and security (where some differences exist). He may be even tempted to reassert political pre-eminence in order to “balance” their power. Early 2005 could be the Hu-Wen team’s real “baptism of fire” vis-a-vis the “Jiang clique” (which has been relegated to the back bench since the SARS epidemic last spring). A potential internal power struggle cannot be discounted.

Early 2005 may therefore link for the first time, since the November 2002 Chinese Communist Party leadership transition, internal power consolidation or struggle (within) with regional and international challenges (without), thus constituting China’s first critical political test for affirming its stability and credibility on the world stage.

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