



## Will Chen Shui-bian ever quit? By Shelley Rigger

Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian is facing the worst crisis of his crisis-ridden presidency. For the first time, there is a real possibility that Chen will face open opposition from within his own Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

The legislature has scheduled a vote on a motion to recall Chen for Nov. 24. If it goes forward, the recall vote will be the fourth since Chen took office in May 2000. Like the others, it probably will fail, but unlike the others, there is a chance that it will succeed, thanks to the DPP's growing disunity.

Relations between Chen and his DPP comrades have been deteriorating for more than a year. Two high-profile legislators, both affiliated with the influential New Tide group, quit the party last week. Others have called for Chen to take a "leave of absence." It seems that a growing number of DPP politicians are convinced Chen is millstone around their collective neck; they soon may be ready to cut themselves loose.

Chen has been under attack from the opposition Blue camp, including the KMT and the People's First Party, since his first inauguration in May 2000. With his party's backing, he has fended off all of the Blue challenges to date. But the DPP's solidarity in support of Chen has eroded badly after a year of escalating scandals in the presidential office.

Blue allegations had little effect on the DPP or its supporters until a presidential aide was implicated in late summer 2005. With elections for municipal executives just a few months away, the timing could hardly have been worse. Two months before the election a group of young DPP politicians called for a "New DPP Movement" to examine the party's flaws and revive its core values of democracy and clean government. Senior party leaders crushed the nascent movement within days.

The DPP's performance in December exceeded even the most pessimistic predictions. Blues won 16 out of 23 executive posts; Greens captured six. The DPP's flagship candidates were defeated by large margins. The defeat amplified growing dissent in the DPP, and for several months, it appeared the party might sideline the president. In May, after his son-in-law was indicted on corruption-related charges, the DPP forced Chen to cede much of his power to Premier Su Tseng-chang.

Chen's slide was arrested in June, when the Blue camp tabled its second recall motion (the first was in 2001). Forced to choose between an unpopular and ineffective DPP leader and their Blue rivals, DPP legislators backed Chen.

The reprieve was brief. In July, a group of scholars sympathetic to the DPP circulated a petition urging Chen to take moral responsibility for Taiwan's democracy; a month

later, former DPP Chairman Shih Ming-teh began mobilizing citizens to demand the president's resignation. A third recall attempt failed in the legislature on Oct. 13.

On Nov. 3, prosecutors announced that First Lady Wu Shu-chen would be indicted on corruption-related charges, and that evidence existed to indict Chen as well. Chen's Nov. 6 speech explaining his actions had little effect, and he is now facing a fourth recall vote.

Chen's latest misfortunes raise a number of questions:

*Will he resign?* It's hard to see what advantage Chen gains by resigning. The corollary to "where there's life, there's hope" is "once you quit, that's it." Also, the only thing standing between Chen and an indictment is his presidential immunity. The longer he hangs on, the more time he has to arrange a deal (or a plea).

*Will the DPP force him out?* It's not clear what leverage the party has, other than the legislators' votes on the recall motion, and supporting the recall – or calling for Chen's resignation – means siding with the Blues. Over the past five years the Blues have used every imaginable stratagem to thwart, frustrate, and undermine Chen and his party. That makes it hard for even the most disgruntled DPP politician to take their side.

*Will DPP legislators support the recall motion?* The dilemma for legislators is this: if they support the recall, they might gain centrist votes, but they'll lose support from the party base. That's trading a bird in the hand for a very skittish bird in the bush. Unless they're prepared to quit the DPP (or politics), legislators also have to consider party sanctions: will the DPP renominate those who support a recall motion? Unlikely.

*If Chen stays in office, what might he do?* Not much. Despite his assertion that he reflects on his troubles "three times a day," it seems fair to assume that political survival consumes most of his attention. The legacy Chen hoped to leave was constitutional reform, but the prospect of major revision – especially changes that would antagonize the PRC – is remote. Getting a radical revision through the Blue-dominated legislature would be impossible, and there is no way that a president with approval ratings hovering around 20 percent could mobilize a popular movement for reform outside of the legal process. If there is a constitutional revision in the next two years, it is likely to reflect the interests of Blue and Green legislators, not Chen's ideology.

*If Chen leaves office, what happens then?* Vice President Annette Lu has a reputation as an ideologue on cross-Strait issues; she is also said to be mercurial. No wonder some observers are worried. Still, the fact that Lu would succeed Chen seems not to trouble the pro-resignation forces. A number of Blue politicians have said explicitly they have no

objection to President Lu: they just want Chen out. They are confident that the same forces that constrain Chen – most notably the Blues' legislative majority and the DPP's sagging popularity – would constrain Lu equally. Nor is it likely that 16 months in the presidential office would give Lu, who has few allies within her party, enough momentum to win the DPP's presidential nomination in 2008, much less the election.

*What's the outlook for 2008?* One might imagine that the DPP's misfortunes would be an opportunity for the KMT to strengthen its position. In fact, however, the KMT is in almost as much disarray as the DPP. For months, Blue politicians have been thrashing KMT favorite Ma Ying-jeou. In June, James Soong and others dragged Ma into the recall movement against his better judgment, making him look unprincipled and indecisive. To "reward" Ma's cooperation, Soong threw his own hat in the ring for the Taipei mayoral election, potentially splitting the Blue vote. Most recently, Ma has faced allegations of corruption in his office (the case is a miniature version of the charges facing Chen) and open calls for twice-defeated candidate Lien Chan to challenge Ma for the party's presidential nomination in 2008.

The only presidential contender who might be able to gain from the chaos is Premier Su, who has quietly conducted the business of government for almost a year. Although it's not clear whether voters will credit Su, he has kept things running through extraordinary political upheavals. Over the summer, Su's government achieved significant progress in cross-Strait relations, expanding direct passenger charter flights during holidays, opening direct cargo charter flights, and creating a mechanism for negotiating tourism-related issues with the PRC. If the KMT cannot unify its message, Su could come out of this *annus horribilis* looking like the closest thing Taiwan has to adult supervision.

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