



## **Taiwan Strait: Back to the Good Old Days** by Denny Roy

Surprises and exciting finishes are the rule in Taiwan's elections. In the months before the presidential election on March 22, Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Ma Ying-jeou led Democratic Progress Party (DPP) candidate Frank Hsieh Chang-ting in public opinion polls by as much as 20 percent, but the gap appeared to be shrinking as the vote approached. Several ethnically charged criticisms of Ma were eating into his lead.

Hsieh and other DPP figures argued that the "one China market" advocated by Ma and running mate Vincent Siew would increase unemployment and lower wages in Taiwan while hastening Taiwan's absorption by China. Ma previously held a U.S. green card. When questioned about it, he first said he did not have one, then said that it had lapsed and that he never intended to conceal it. The DPP used this issue and what they called Ma's inadequate explanation to challenge his commitment to Taiwan. The recent Chinese crackdown on Tibetan protestors allowed the DPP to play on Taiwanese fears of China and to link these fears with Ma. Ma unwittingly abetted this strategy when he initially said it was not clear whether the Chinese government or the protestors were to blame for the violence.

The DPP also argued that giving the presidency to a KMT that already dominates the legislature would be unhealthy for Taiwan's democracy, a point that transcends ethnic scaremongering.

When the votes were in, however, the result was a resounding 16 percentage point victory for Ma. Why did he win by such a large margin? The DPP claims it is because the KMT has disproportionate influence over Taiwan's media (some even believe the PRC helps finance Blue-oriented media outlets). This would help explain what Ma's critics call his "Teflon man" quality — the damage caused by his mistakes has made relatively little impact.

To other observers, the largest single factor in Ma's victory appeared to be public dissatisfaction with incumbent DPP President Chen Shui-bian's performance, particularly the weak economy that has plagued Taiwan through most of his presidency. Chen's implication in a corruption scandal, for which he may face prosecution after he leaves office, also hurt, as it undermined the DPP's longstanding effort to present itself as a clean alternative to an allegedly corrupt KMT. The "one party domination" argument may have been negated by the public's weariness with the divided government that prevailed during the Chen years and often obstructed much-needed legislation.

The election result shows that the KMT has been successful in moving toward the center to capture additional votes, while the DPP has done the opposite. Analysts of

Taiwan's domestic politics believe the DPP's core supporters comprise about 40 percent of the electorate. In this election, then, the DPP failed to attract voters beyond their core. In contrast, Ma's KMT showed an ability to moderate its positions to attract the critical section of the electorate that showed up in opinion polls as "undecided." As U.S. Taiwan politics expert Shelley Rigger noted, DPP campaigners relied on a "conversion strategy" that emphasized a shrill and divisive message: voting DPP is the only defense against Taiwan being sold out to China. The fact that many native Taiwanese voted for Ma proves that this narrow definition of patriotism has limited appeal. Ma even won in Kaohsiung, a southern Taiwan city where Hsieh served as mayor and a traditional DPP stronghold.

The latest round of referenda was a minor disaster, ruined by partisanship. The exercise was dubious from the beginning. Asking Taiwan's people if they want membership in the United Nations under the name "Taiwan" made little sense except as a tactic to use Taiwan nationalism to mobilize DPP supporters on Election Day. As a counterweight, the KMT sponsored its own similar UN referendum, giving voters the opportunity to choose whether they would like to join the UN under the name "Taiwan" or "Republic of China." In fact, the premise was a complete fantasy because the UN is not going to admit Taiwan given Beijing's opposition no matter how Taiwan's people vote.

Both referenda were approved overwhelmingly by those who voted, but both failed because only about 35 percent of Taiwan's registered voters cast ballots. The law requires affirmative votes from over 50 percent of the electorate for a referendum to pass in Taiwan. None of the six offered to date have reached that threshold. In this case the competing referenda proved counterproductive. The PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office misconstrued the result, announcing that "the issue of independence has not won the heart of the Taiwanese people." Yet even without China's bias, foreign observers might reach the false conclusion that Taiwan's people do not want to join the United Nations.

In the run-up to the election, both China and the United States tried to avoid hurting Ma, whose projected policies offer both the best chance of getting what they want from Taiwan. Those efforts were mostly successful, although many in Taiwan interpreted a visit by former AIT Chairwoman Therese Shaheen as attempted U.S. interference.

China wants to halt the drift toward formal and permanent separation they perceived under Chen. The U.S. wants to reduce tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Ma supports the "one China" principle, which Beijing has said will clear the way for a resumption of cross-Strait talks (suspended since then-President Lee Teng-hui's "special state-to-state relationship" comment in 1999). Ma also favors expanded cross-Strait

economic and social contacts, which are part of the PRC strategy for peaceful unification.

In short, a Ma presidency will greatly assure the PRC that Taiwan is back on track toward politically joining China. Unless the Chinese leadership becomes overanxious, this should greatly reduce the need to influence Taiwan through military threats. Cross-Strait peace in turn reduces the necessity of U.S. intervention or counter-threats against China, moving the most volatile issue in Sino-U.S. relations to the back burner.

One of Ma's challenges will be to improve cross-Strait relations without losing domestic support; in other words, he must satisfy both the Chinese government and Taiwan society. Ma must prove himself to the over 40 percent of his countrymen who voted against him. He cannot move too quickly or too far to accommodate Beijing. To demonstrate that he is not the sellout, some in Taiwan fear Ma must carry out some policies that are inherently undesirable to Beijing. First, he will have to insist that China treat Taipei as an equal negotiating partner rather than a subordinate. Second, he will want to repair the relationship with the United States as a hedge against China.

Ma is a very different kind of leader than Chen. Still, some concrete actions by Taipei will be necessary if Taiwan wishes to return the relationship with the U.S. to the level it was at before Chen took office. Americans were unhappy with Chen for two reasons. First, he appeared to be exploiting the cover provided by the U.S.-Taiwan relationship to pursue an agenda inconsistent with U.S. interests: moving closer to formal independence at the risk of war with China. Second, Taiwan's relatively low level of defense spending and unwillingness to pay for the arms package Washington offered in 2001 created among many Americans a suspicion that Taiwan was a defense free-rider.

Ma has already begun to heal the rift. Harvard-educated and fluent in English, he made a favorable impression during a visit to America in 2006. The KMT is apparently interested in purchasing another batch of F-16 fighters. And Ma has committed to raising Taiwan's defense spending to 3 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

Beijing seems to have learned that using overt threats against Taiwan tends to bring about the opposite of the desired result. Nevertheless, the Chinese Communist Party's understanding of democratic politics in Taiwan is suspect. Some Chinese elites may see Ma's presidency as an opportunity to push for major steps toward unification, making up for time lost since 2000.

But expecting too much too soon from Ma without regard to his domestic political environment would be a mistake even in terms of China's own interests. Such impatience could set the stage for a backlash in 2012 that would return the DPP to power. Beijing must realize that it is in China's interests to give Ma enough rewards and concessions to maintain his legitimacy at home. The Chinese could not grant any leeway to a Taiwan president whom they believed was a committed "separatist," but they can to Ma. Some possible acts of reconciliation Beijing could offer include a freeze or withdrawal of the ballistic missiles arrayed against Taiwan,

which can be easily redeployed if necessary; and acquiescence to Taiwan attaining observer status in the World Health Assembly.

Ma's presidency represents an opportunity for the transformed KMT to show how competently it can govern Taiwan, for China to show some magnanimity in cross-Strait relations now that its Chen nightmare is ending, and for Taipei to rekindle the previous warmth of the U.S.-Taiwan relationship. It is too much to hope that the great potential in all these areas will be fully realized, but at minimum some improvement in each is likely compared with the Chen Shui-bian era.

*Denny Roy ([RoyD@Eastwestcenter.org](mailto:RoyD@Eastwestcenter.org)) is a Senior Fellow at the East-West Center in Honolulu.*