



TAIWAN NEEDS MEDIA REFORM TO SAVE ITS DEMOCRACY

BY BILL SHARP

Bill Sharp (we.sharp@gmail.com) is a Visiting Scholar in the Department of History at National Taiwan University.

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History shows that the failure of democratic states has typically resulted from a conjunction of powerful external enemies and deep domestic division. As such, Taiwan is vulnerable to Chinese agitation and penetration.

Taiwan is the gleaming beam of democracy in Asia. However, Taiwan is polarized—mildly, but still polarized. Polarization results in the government’s inability to resolve pressing problems due to low public trust, lack of institutional reform, questions about leadership, and inefficiency.

Better governance in Taiwan has been stymied by Taiwan’s political culture. Furthermore, governance is complicated by the polarization within both the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang (KMT). In the DPP, President Tsai Ing-wen has had difficulty in passing major reforms when a number of DPP members of the legislature did not fully support her. In the KMT, the young want a KMT that is more Taiwan- and reform-focused, versus older members who want more focus on China and tradition.

Taiwan’s political culture is shallow and short-sighted. Democracy in Taiwan has led to unreasonable expectations, creating a spoiled electorate who demand instant results or they meander to another party.

Taiwan’s political polarization and political culture provide grist for Chinese propaganda and influence building. I will direct attention to four institutions that

impact everyone’s life: 1) the constitution; 2) the legislature; 3) judicial reform; and 4) the media.

The Taiwan government is based on the Republic of China Constitution of 1947. Written in China during the civil war to fit Chinese circumstances, the constitution is not Taiwan-centric. Those opposing [constitutional revision](#) fear it would be the end of the Republic of China and a declaration of Taiwan independence. Those in support contend revision would better serve contemporary Taiwan by diluting the concentration of power in the presidency. Moreover, they argue abolishing the Control Yuan (similar to the US Government Accountability Office) and Examination Yuan (similar to the US government’s Office of Personnel Management) would be cost-effective and streamline government, in that other components of the government already carry out these tasks. Passage of the [labor standards](#) and [pension reform](#) bills was contentious, divisive, and sparked huge rallies which often became violent. Given political polarization, one can only imagine what constitutional reform would do.

Owing to political polarization, a contentious atmosphere often exists in the legislature, sparking brawls on the legislative floor. A [set of rules](#) guiding rational debate and prohibiting the use of profanity and loud language would improve the public’s view of the body. Criticism of the institution often focuses on too much power being concentrated in the hands of the president of the legislature and party caucus leaders. Voting tends to reflect Taiwan’s zero-sum political culture.

Polling consistently shows that Taiwanese have little trust in the justice system. Attorney Jerry Cheng, founder of the Taiwan Jury Association, [says](#) people feel that way “because most of them do not believe decisions made by judges are fair and impartial.” Taiwan’s justice system has long suffered from a lack of transparency. Many judges are appointed at an early age, raising charges that they lack real life and legal experience. Judges, once selected, have life-long tenure, and there is no system to assess their performance or remedy wrongful actions. There is also a dispute over whether to employ an independent jury system, or a system that utilizes lay judges to advise professional judges, who then cooperatively determine the verdict and sentencing. Premier Su Tseng-chang sent a bill to the legislature supporting a Japanese-style lay judge system. According to [Cheng’s group](#), 80% of the population supports an independent jury system, like in the US, UK, South Korea, and Hong Kong.

Under martial law from 1949-1987, all forms of media were strictly controlled. After the lifting of martial law, Taiwan went from one extreme to another, becoming a media free for all. “China has penetrated 17 Taiwan media outlets: eight print media, four TV stations, three weekly publications, one publisher, and one technical magazine,” author He Qinglian wrote in *Red Penetration*.

Author Jane Rickards [argues](#) that broadcast and print media have excess capacity resulting in endless competition. There is a dearth of professionalism, characterized by a lack of objectivity. Taiwan journalists should better verify facts. They self-censor in order to not offend Chinese officials who have placed highly profitable advertisements. In an interview with this author, National Communications Commission (NCC) Commissioner Hung Chen-ling said, “even after 10 years of discussion, Taiwan has yet to come up with a law to prevent concentration of media ownership.” A good example is the Want Want Group, which owns Zhongtian TV, Zhongshi TV, and *The China Times* newspaper. The owner of the Want Want Group is Tsai Eng-meng, one of Taiwan’s wealthiest men, who has large investments in China and is decidedly pro-China and pro-unification. Because of his political orientation, he is dubbed the “Red Media Baron.” Author [J. Michael Cole](#) has noted that in 2017-2018 the Want Want Group received T\$2.9 billion (more than US\$96 million), possibly for advertisements and disinformation benefitting China. In March 2019, Zhongtian TV [was fined](#) T\$1 million (US\$32,000) by the NCC. In the midst of the 2020 presidential elections campaign, 50% of Zhongtian TV headlines featured presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu, whom Tsai allegedly supported financially.

While the NCC has oversight authority for TV stations, the Ministry of Culture has oversight authority for the print media. According to [Reuters](#), 10 former and current employees and news managers of five media groups (to protect the identity of sources and organizations, no names were given) provided contracts signed by the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) for articles to promote the image of China in Taiwan. For example, the TAO paid US\$4,300 for fake stories promoting Taiwan business in China in order to win the support of Taiwanese for unification.

Taiwan has no regulatory mechanism or laws to govern social media. Facebook and the like are extremely popular, powerful forces of influence that China has used to spread disinformation. [Cole](#) says

“the use of disinformation and fake news transmitted through social media has resulted in nearly 3,400 Chinese attacks per day (during the 2018 local elections) on social media which are designed to discredit democracy, President Tsai, and the DPP.” In the midst of the coronavirus, China has used social media to create doubt and confusion.

Taiwan should establish a centralized regulatory organization with oversight over broadcast, print, and social media. It must also break up consolidation of media organizations. Finally, it must create an enforceable media ethics code.

Taiwan needs to keep reforming its democracy to consolidate internally, to win the support of other countries, and to play a role in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy.

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