

Ma Victory Signals (Cautious) Continuity in Taiwan

Written by Hans Stockton

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HANS STOCKTON, JAN 22 2012

Taiwan's incumbent Nationalist Party (KMT) president, Mr. Ma Ing-jeou, emerged from the January 14 polls victorious with 51.6% of the popular vote in a peaceful, competitive election. The Democratic Progressive Party candidate, Dr. Tsai Ing-wen, garnered 45.6%, and Mr. James Soong of the People First Party (PFP) came in a distant third with 2.7% of the vote. While Mr. Ma won re-election, his margin was just one third that of his 17 point victory over the DPP candidate in 2008. Also, while the KMT retained its majority status in the legislature, its standing was reduced from 66% to 55% of the seats.

The fifth direct presidential election on Taiwan, this round differed from past elections in the emphasis that the three contenders placed on economic, trade, and public policy issues rather than the divisive and emotive issue of national identity and ethnic cleavage. This, combined with little charismatic appeal of the candidates, led many in Taiwan to characterize the campaign as "cold." Mr. Ma campaigned on a conservative platform of continuity and economic growth, largely by maintaining his party's rapprochement with Beijing and good relations with the United States. Dr. Tsai's campaign emphasized social justice, equity, consensus, and protecting Taiwan's sovereignty.

Taiwan's relationship with mainland China remained a central issue for voters given the island's increasing economic dependence on the mainland and Chinese tourism in Taiwan. The main contention between Mr. Ma and Dr. Tsai was not whether to continue economic engagement with the mainland, but the basis and speed for such engagement. Mr. Ma (acting as chairman of the ruling KMT) and leaders in Beijing have premised negotiations on Beijing's pre-condition of accepting the "1992 Consensus" of "one China, two interpretations." While Beijing may allow the KMT to disagree with its own claim that Taiwan belongs to the People's Republic of China for public consumption at home, CCP leaders have made clear that they do not accept that KMT interpretation. Dr. Tsai challenged the legitimacy of the "1992 Consensus" and the lack of transparency and bureaucratic nature of the KMT's rapprochement with Beijing, proposing a vaguely defined alternative "Taiwan Consensus." Tsai's proposal for a new consensus, combined with her promotion of coalition government during the last week of the election, in the end, failed to capture the imagination of a majority of Taiwan's voters.

Early on, it appeared that Mr. Soong's entry might draw votes from Mr. Ma and deprive him of sufficient support to turn the election in Dr. Tsai's favor. A former KMT heavyweight and founder of a KMT splinter party, the People First Party, Mr. Soong enjoyed early support in the mid teens. This dropped to between 5 – 7% in the weeks prior to the election. In the end, Mr. Soong captured a scant 2.7% of the popular vote. He suffered defections of key supporters in central Taiwan prior to the polls that brought votes back to the KMT. Many also believe that his final support dwindled due to a strategic choice made by voters to support one of the two major candidates rather than cast what was essentially a protest vote.

While many domestic and international observers have declared the presidential and legislative elections to have been free, there is some concern about the fairness of the elections. Anecdotal estimates are that the KMT, one of the wealthiest political parties in the world, had a campaign war chest nearly five times that of the DPP and more than ten times that of the PFP. As well, charges were raised by both the DPP and PFP of violations of administrative neutrality, and the KMT's mobilization of state resources to gain advantage. Additionally, while China's influence was perhaps the most muted compared to past elections, claims were made that Chinese officials sought to "encourage" Taiwan's business leaders and Taiwanese working on the mainland to support the KMT through a

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combination of incentive and veiled coercion. In the weeks and days prior to the election, a flurry of major Taiwanese business elites publicly stated their support for the “1992 Consensus.” While not necessarily endorsements for Ma, the warning was clear that Tsai’s “Taiwan Consensus” was perceived as problematic for trade continuity with China.

Added to the category of “external interference” in Taiwan’s election by both the KMT and DPP were the American administration, foreign scholars, and other observers commenting on the campaign process, domestic and international perceptions of the candidates, and outcome scenarios. Visiting scholars and other democracy advocates were cautioned to stay neutral and discouraged from speaking with local media. Whereas in years past, such groups were eagerly welcomed to the showcase of Taiwan’s democracy in action, this year marked an unusual degree of caution and even suspicion. This was largely fed by actions of the Obama administration during this 2012 campaign that included the highest level visits to Taiwan by American officials in decades, placing Taiwan on the visa-waiver candidate list, and anonymous US State Department comments that clearly indicated a preference for President Ma’s approach to cross-strait relations. Comments by a former AIT director (Douglass Paal) the day before the polls were also perceived as intentionally meant to signal the American preference for Ma, although Paal was not acting in any official capacity. Participating in an election observer committee in Taiwan, former Alaska senator, Frank Murkowski, rebuked Paal for making such statements. The American Institute on Taiwan canceled a meeting with Mr. Paal planned for later that same day in an effort to publicly distance the administration from his statements.

For the first time, Taiwan’s voters cast ballots for both presidential and legislative officers. Paralleling cooling support for President Ma was the diminished majority size of the KMT and recovery of the parliamentary opposition. Of 113 legislative seats, the KMT won 64; the DPP won 40; and the remaining 9 seats were divided among the People First Party (3), Taiwan Solidarity Union (3), Non-Party Solidarity Union (2), and one independent. This outcome reflected a ten-seat loss for the KMT (8 of which were gained in Taiwan’s south), and reduction of its majority from 66% to 55% of the legislative seats. The DPP has regained sufficient legislative strength to propose constitutional amendments and introduce executive recall motions.

Some basic findings are clear from the election results. First, while the majority of Taiwan’s citizens voted for continuity of KMT governance, the diminished size of Ma’s support and his party’s legislative majority signal a cautionary note to domestic and external actors. Given that the single biggest (self-inflicted) hit to Ma’s popular support during this election year was his ill-fated proposal for peace talks with Beijing if re-elected, moderate voters are not willing to give the green light to political negotiations across the strait. Thus, Beijing must now be satisfied with continuing economic engagement and show at least another four years of patience prior to any political talks that involve reduction of Taiwan’s de facto sovereignty. With this, the USA will not be absolved of its security commitment to Taiwan and our own tensions with Beijing over the Taiwan Relations Act will not disappear anytime soon.

Secondly, the pattern of voting has shifted back to pre-2008 characteristics, but in an even more exaggerated sense in the legislature. While the KMT continues its near monopoly of legislative districts in Taiwan’s heavily populated north, the DPP has re-established its own dominance in the less populated south. The central part of Taiwan is a KMT majority, albeit not as dominant, and remains a potential swing region for legislative races in 2016. The 2012 outcome likely demonstrates that the DPP losses in southern Taiwan in 2008 were largely because of dissatisfaction with the former party chairman and two-term president, Mr. Chen Shui-bian, rather than indicative of any change in voter identification with the KMT. DPP chairwoman Tsai is largely credited with managing a remarkable rehabilitation of the DPP to make this the case.

Third, Taiwan’s adoption of single member districts and a small at-large tier in 2005 has produced another step towards a two-party system. Although multiple parties now hold seats, only two parties matter. Third parties managed only one district seat win out of 73 districts and barely 10% of total seats. While 34 seats are reserved for proportionally allocated at-large seats, the two main parties dominated with a combined 29 seats. This left two minor parties with a combined 5 at-large seats. In the remaining tier of 6 reserved aboriginal seats, the KMT won 4 of 6.

Ma staked his re-election on a theme of domestic continuity, incremental improvement of economic ties with China,

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and backed away from his desire for political talks and won. Tsai downplayed the identity issue, sought a more moderate approach to dialogue with China, and failed to mobilize sufficient numbers of green voters and/or convert KMT-leaning moderates. The lesson here seems to be that moving a bit to the center paid off for the KMT, but that moderation was an insufficient strategy for the DPP. Despite real concerns in Taiwan about growing economic inequity and sustainable development, voters seem to have placed their overall economic bets with the KMT. Whether the DPP seeks to refine a moderate approach or take this loss as a call to return to its traditional grass-roots will unfold in the year to come. While the Obama administration can seemingly breathe a sigh of relief, it must be mindful of unintended consequences of Taiwan's continuing shift into China's orbit. Of additional interest in the year to come will be whether high level American visits to Taiwan continue post-election and any role the island may play in President Obama's "Asia Pivot."

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