One China, One Taiwan

Little Chance of a Red Future for Taipei

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On January 16, the people of Taiwan will go to the polls to elect a new president and new legislative representatives. Like the United States, Taiwan has a two-term limit on the presidency, which means that the incumbent president, Ma Ying-jeou, must step down. And like the 2016 U.S. elections, the 2016 Taiwan elections are wide open.

Ma’s governing Kuomintang (KMT) party enters these elections in complete disarray. Its spring 2015 presidential primaries resulted in the nomination of a senior legislator named Hung Hsiu-chu, its first-ever female candidate for president. But then in an unprecedented move, she was displaced by party chairman Eric Chu at a special party convention held on October 17. Chu went on to claim Hung’s former place at the top of the ticket.

Chu is widely viewed as a placeholder candidate with a mandate not so much to win January’s election as to prevent serious losses for the KMT, especially in the legislature. Tellingly, he has not resigned his position as mayor of New Taipei City, Taiwan’s largest local government area. He has instead taken three months’ leave while an acting mayor watches over his suburban Taipei power base.

Opposing the KMT is the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its candidate, Tsai Ing-wen. A veteran campaigner who lost to the KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou in 2012, Tsai is widely expected to emerge from the polls as Taiwan’s first female president. She would also be only the second DPP president in Taiwan’s history. Her predecessor, Chen Shui-bian, president from 2000–2008, was afterward convicted of corruption and is now out of jail on medical parole.

The lawyerly Tsai is a former college professor who likes to compare herself to German Chancellor Angela Merkel. A better touchstone might be her fellow law professor U.S. President Barack Obama. On her father’s side, Tsai is a member of Taiwan’s minority Hakka community, Taiwan’s largest minority group. The Hakka make up about 15 percent of their country’s population and have suffered from centuries of official and unofficial discrimination. Tsai’s commitment to her Hakka identity has been questioned in the past. Questions of ethnic and national identity have always been at the heart of Taiwan’s politics, but never more so than in the current election.

TO BE TAIWANESE

Taiwan has a messy history of invasion, occupation, colonization, refuge, and intermarriage. As an ethnic and linguistic label, the word “Taiwanese” refers directly to the Hoklo people of southern Fujian province, who migrated from the mainland China to the island of Taiwan starting in the 1600s. Many came as refugees, fleeing the Manchu conquest of China in 1644–50 that established the Qing dynasty. As the remnants of the previous Ming dynasty retreated from the mainland, they established an anti-Manchu redoubt on Taiwan.

The Hakka are an ethnic and linguistic minority in southern China who went on to become an ethnic and linguistic minority in Taiwan. Their origins are obscure, but on entering Taiwan in the 1600s,
they settled in the mountain interior—pushing back the forest frontier against Taiwan's indigenous nations.

Indigenous peoples constitute only a small portion of Taiwan's population today. The only people who have an unambiguous claim a Taiwanese identity that has no connection to China, they are, like indigenous peoples everywhere, a severely marginalized group. Similarly, the single most important political issue for the indigenous peoples of Taiwan is land.

Finally, Taiwan is home to some latecomers. In a replay of the Ming-Qing transition of the 1600s, Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese nationalist government fled the mainland in 1949 in the wake of its loss to Mao Zedong's Red Army. Taiwan, recently freed from Japanese occupation, became Chiang's stronghold in his miniature cold war with China. His KMT party declared a state of emergency in Taiwan that was only lifted in 1987.

The result of Chiang's white terror, as the state of emergency became known, is that Taiwan must be the only place in the world where people fondly recall the “good old days” of Japanese occupation. (Japan conquered Taiwan in 1895 in the aftermath of the first Sino-Japanese War and ruled the island for 50 years until the end of World War II in 1945.) By all accounts, the Japanese occupation was severely exploitative, and revolts occurred on a regular basis. But memories of Japanese brutality were overwritten by the brutality of the postwar KMT military dictatorship.

The nationalist Chinese occupation of Taiwan got off to a bad start in 1945. And things got worse during the February 28, 1947 228 Incident, Taiwan’s Tiananmen Square. The confrontation arose out of a dispute over the seizure of contraband cigarettes. Angry with the KMT’s ruthless exploitation of Taiwan’s resources to aid its civil war against the Chinese communists, people came out in spontaneous rebellion all over Taiwan. The KMT responded with a massacre, killing between 18,000 and 28,000 in cold blood and many more in the red scares that followed.

Today’s KMT carries the heavy burden of its historical roots as the party of occupation. It is clearly identified in Taiwanese politics as the “China” party. Although it no longer advocates a quixotic invasion of the mainland to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it does agree with the CCP that there is only one China and that Taiwan is a part of it. Since no one seriously believes that the KMT will ever be the ruling party of China, the KMT’s “one China” stance is ultimately accommodationist. The old enemies are now friends, or at least friendly colleagues.

Since 2005, the KMT and the CCP have even held regular summits of their party leaders, culminating in the November 9, 2015, meeting of their political leaders, Ma and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Lauded internationally, Ma received little credit at home for his cross-strait diplomacy. Although he won the presidency by a comfortable margin in 2012, Ma is now deeply unpopular in Taiwan.

Ma's fall from grace was quite sudden. On March 18, 2014, a student group occupied Taiwan's legislative chamber to protest deepening economic ties between China and Taiwan. The students refused to budge for nearly a month, and their resistance blossomed into the national Sunflower Movement, which embraced Taiwan’s distinct national identity. KMT hard-liners pilloried Ma for his weakness; DPP activists called for his resignation. Boosted by the momentum of the Sunflower Movement, the DPP swept local elections in November 2014.

Supporters of Taiwan’s ruling Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang (KMT), chairman and presidential candidate Eric Chu shout slogans during a rally ahead of Taiwan’s election on January 16, in Yuanlin City, Changhua County, January 12, 2016.
If the KMT presents itself as the party of Taiwanese-Chinese unity, the DPP presents itself as the party of Taiwanese national identity. But DPP leader Tsai insists that she would make no unilateral changes to the status quo of Taiwan's legal limbo. Unlike the previous DPP president, she does not publicly advocate a formal declaration of independence for Taiwan. In the absence of a pro-independence stance from the DPP, it may seem to outsiders like it makes little difference which party wins in January. But that isn’t true.

PARTY ON

Each of Taiwan’s major parties is at the center of a coalition with multiple minor parties. The KMT camp is known as the blue coalition; the DPP camp is known as the green coalition. Where the United States has red states and blue states, Taiwan has blue cities and green cities. The KMT blue camp is strongest in Taipei’s massive suburban belt and the DPP green camp is strongest in central Taipei and in Taiwan’s deep south. These color patterns are no coincidence; they closely follow the identity faultlines that run deep through Taiwanese society.

The blue coalition brings the KMT together with former KMT splinter groups that are even more nationalist than the main party. The archetypical supporter of the blue coalition is the clean-cut businessman in a dark suit carrying a leather briefcase. Historically drawn from the managers, bureaucrats, and plutocrats who fled the mainland after 1949, the power base of this camp is Eric Chu’s constituency of New Taipei City. The 1949 generation settled first and foremost in the capital, Taipei, but as Taipei matured from a virtual refugee camp into a modern metropolis this group moved up and out to suburban New Taipei City.

The green coalition is a more diverse grouping that unites the DPP with several smaller pro-independence parties—although not, ironically, the environmentalist Green Party. The archetypical supporters of the green coalition are the Taipei university professor and the Kaohsiung blue-collar worker. The DPP has dominated politics in Taiwan’s industrial second city of Kaohsiung ever since Taiwan’s democratization in the 1990s. Kaohsiung’s union movement was an early base of resistance to KMT dictatorship.

Holding a 30-point margin in the latest presidential polls, the green coalition’s Tsai is almost certain to win the January 16 elections. This will put the green coalition, which already made a clean sweep of Taiwan’s 2014 local elections, in a strong position to set the country’s policy agenda for the rest of the decade. But despite the perennial bugbear of a Chinese invasion that China has no capacity to undertake, any adjustments in Taiwan’s policies toward China will be minor. The changes demanded by the DPP and its supporters are important but finely tuned. Taiwan’s color revolution is likely to be invisible to most observers outside Taiwan.

In main, that is because the big issue in Taiwan is not independence but identity. International recognition of Taiwan’s independence is a nonstarter and everybody knows it. A unilateral declaration of independence wouldn’t change the fact that China staunchly opposes all diplomatic efforts to recognize Taiwan as a sovereign nation. A declaration of independence might cause a brief pause in otherwise improving cross-strait relations, but it wouldn’t fundamentally change Taiwan’s place in the world—or even its relationship with China.

Although a Taiwanese declaration of independence would arouse much sympathy in the United States, it would not likely result in American diplomatic recognition. Taiwan may be a fellow democracy with free and vibrant political institutions, but the United States is a global hegemon with global responsibilities and a massive stake in the stability of the Asia-Pacific region. The United
States may sell weapons to Taiwan in a tit-for-tat response to Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea, but it is not about to start World War III over Taiwanese sovereignty.

The real revolution of a DPP victory in Taiwan will be a revolution in identity. There is already a pitched battle in Taiwan over the teaching of history. In the old textbooks, the history of the Chinese people began in the fertile valley of the Yellow River and ended in exile on the rocky island of Taiwan. In the new textbooks, the lush island of Taiwan was buffeted by historical forces beyond its control but ultimately found its way to democracy, prosperity, and independence.

The emergence of a distinctively Taiwanese identity is bitterly resisted by the old guard of the KMT, but the people of Taiwan overwhelmingly identify either as Taiwanese or as a mix of Taiwanese and Chinese. Nearly 90 percent of Taiwanese want equal status for their country in the international community. While these numbers are somewhat suspect—the questions seem designed in such a way as to elicit a positive response—the overall trend is clear. Although most can trace a Chinese heritage, very few people in Taiwan want to be Chinese.

American pundits often discuss whether the United States should accommodate China through the Finlandization of Taiwan or even abandon Taiwan to China. Such analyses are at least 30 years too late. Taiwan will never again be part of China. That train has left the station. Taiwan is a highly successful country of more than 23 million people with its own politics and its own place in the world. Admittedly, that place may fall short of what many Taiwanese people want for their country, but it is nonetheless secure. January’s election won’t change that.