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Election Season Returns to Taiwan: Prospects for Taiwan's National Elections in 2012

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Taiwan is once again gearing itself up for election season, with both legislative and presidential contests to be held in early 2012. After eight years in opposition, in 2008 Ma Ying-jeou and his Kuomintang (KMT) party returned to power on the back of landslide victories. Ma won the presidency with almost 60 per cent of the vote, while the KMT and its allies gained three quarters of the legislative seats. Its rival the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) went from being the largest party in parliament to controlling only a fifth of the seats. This meant Taiwan returned to unified government, with all the major branches of government and even most local elected positions in KMT hands. The KMT had not been so politically dominant since the dying days of the martial law era in the late 1980s.

Three years later Taiwan's party politics are once again highly competitive. The DPP has recovered from its disastrous setbacks in 2008. Therefore election results in 2012 are likely to be more like the extremely tight races seen in 2004, than the 2008 walkovers.

A notable feature of the KMT's return to power was how quickly the new government lost popularity. For almost the whole of his first three years in office, President Ma's public dissatisfaction rate has exceeded his public satisfaction rate. At one point after the Morakot Typhoon in August 2009 his public satisfaction rate hit an all time low of 16 per cent, with a dissatisfaction rate of 65 per cent. In a Brookings Northeast Asia Commentary published one year ago, Shelley Rigger termed this development "[Ma's puzzling mid-term malaise.](#)" Taiwan's economic difficulties in the wake of the world financial crash were one factor in this trend. However, Rigger also suggested that the lack of transparency in policy decision-making, poor government communication, and crisis management all contributed to reduced trust in the KMT administration.

The KMT's loss of support and the DPP's recovery have also been visible in the mid-term election tests. In local executive elections held in 2009 and 2010 the KMT won more seats than the DPP, but there were some warning signals for the ruling party. In 2010 the DPP's total vote share of almost 50 per cent exceeded the KMT's 45 per cent. These elections only covered about 60 percent of Taiwan's population, but the last time the DPP's total exceeded the KMT was the 2004 presidential election. The KMT has also suffered some embarrassing setbacks in legislative by-elections

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since 2008. Out of the 13 such contests held, the DPP has won nine, the KMT three and a KMT rebel one, with significant vote swings in favour of the DPP in most cases. What was particularly galling for the KMT was that it had been the incumbent party in all but three of these districts and that it had lost in some of its safest seats, such as Taitung and Hsinchu counties. In previous years the DPP had often struggled to even find a candidate for such districts.

Legislative and presidential elections

Despite Ma's numerous difficulties polls suggest that he remains the favorite to win reelection. He had tended to enjoy a significant lead in polls, of about ten per cent, against his prospective DPP rivals. However, the lead was only two per cent in a poll taken in early March 2011. In other words, if we see major swings in support levels similar to those in the 2000 or 2004 campaigns, then the DPP does have a genuine chance of regaining the presidency.

With a year left before the presidential election making predictions about the result is a risky business. However, the first place we need to consider in evaluating how the campaign will play out is candidate nomination. In the previous four presidential elections, the politics and processes of the nominations have played a key role in the final results. After winning the KMT's party chairman primary in 2005, Ma was free from internal challenges to his presidential bid and had over two years to prepare his 2008 campaign. In contrast, the DPP held a very divisive presidential primary in 2007 and was somewhat splintered and demoralized. Thus in 2008 the nomination processes worked in the KMT's favour.

On paper the situation today looks quite similar. There is unlikely to be a KMT challenger to Ma, as he remains the dominant figure within his party. Currently there are four potential candidates vying for the DPP's nomination, three of whom contested the primary in 2007. At this stage DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen and former premier Su Tseng-chang are neck and neck in the polls, but are way ahead of their other DPP rivals. Although Tsai did serve in the Chen Shui-bian administration, she emerged unscathed from the corruption scandals and she has a background entirely different from other DPP leaders. Born in 1956, Tsai is a decade younger than the generation of DPP leaders that rose to prominence in the struggle for democratization in the 1980s. She has a British PhD, experience as an academic, and is quite new to the party, only becoming a member after 2000. Thus she has more potential to appeal beyond the DPP's core constituencies. However, she has less election experience than her DPP rivals, and it showed in her televised debate with Ma over the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in April 2010 and when she contested the New Taipei City mayoral election in November 2010. Su has a much more impressive political CV and is a powerful speaker. But Su may be less successful at attracting the kind of floating voters the DPP needs to win over, as such voters tend not to be swayed by traditional DPP election appeals. The DPP will hold its primary debates in April 2011, and the candidates' performance will no doubt be one factor in the selection of the party's nominee, which will be based solely on opinion polls. Either Tsai or Su has the potential to give Ma a serious test in 2012.

In January 2008 the KMT won its landslide parliamentary victory two months prior to the presidential election. This put Ma in a very strong position in the March election, as by this time many Taiwanese voters were dissatisfied with poor performance under eight years of divided government. At the time of this writing it has not yet been decided when the next parliamentary elections will be held. There are calls for them to be held simultaneously with the presidential contest, rather than separately as has been the practice in the past, in order to save resources. It is not entirely clear which candidates or parties, if any, would benefit from such an arrangement. Nevertheless, the likelihood of the KMT retaining a parliamentary majority looks strong, though it will be much reduced. The single member district electoral system will continue to favour large parties, particularly the KMT, as in 2008. There is likely to be some rebalancing within this diminished majority: the KMT may win back some of the seats it lost in the post 2008 by-elections, and the DPP may recapture some of the seats in the south, centre and north where it

has a strong support base and lost narrowly in 2008. Nevertheless, since the KMT holds three quarters of the seats and has stronger local support networks it should be able to hold on to a working majority. If the legislative elections take place before the vote for president, the size of the KMT's majority could have an impact on the subsequent presidential campaign. And if the DPP does significantly narrow the KMT majority it will add momentum to the party's presidential campaign.

In 2008 both the DPP and KMT's core voters turned out to support their candidates, but it was the KMT's success at winning floating independents without firm party attachments that turned the tide in its favour. In 2012 whoever wins their support is likely to come out triumphant. A number of the issues and appeals which were decisive in enabling Ma to win the independent voters three years ago are no longer available or effective anymore. In a problem often faced by incumbents, Ma has a shortage of issues that he can run against and thereby rally his supporters.

Ma's personal popularity was critical for the sweeping KMT parliamentary victories in 2008. He featured prominently in the campaign literature of legislative candidates, and they vied to persuade him to speak at their election rallies. But Ma has lost this appeal and since 2009 some KMT candidates now view Ma as a vote loser, thus he has become less prominent in campaign propaganda and in rallies. In fact, this fear that Ma will drag down their campaigns, particularly in the south, is a factor in the preference of some KMT legislators to continue to hold the two elections separately.

Corruption

Similarly, though Ma faced DPP candidate Hsieh Chang-ting, a former premier, in 2008, many voters took the election as a chance to punish the DPP and Chen Shui-bian for the series of corruption scandals that emerged after 2005. With the corruption issue so prominent on the election agenda in 2008, the KMT benefitted from highlighting the issue as it had a cleaner image under Ma. However, with Chen Shui-bian now serving a long prison sentence for corruption, the KMT can no longer rely on the appeal of blaming him for all Taiwan's problems, something that worked wonders for the party electorally between 2005 and 2008. As memories of scandals fade and those implicated no longer hold party office, the DPP has gradually cleaned up its image and now actually is perceived as cleaner than the KMT, which has been hit by corruption and vote buying cases since 2008. If the issue does become prominent again in 2012, it is more likely to benefit the DPP. Rather than viewing Taiwan solely through the lens of cross-Strait relations, we should bear in mind that the corruption issue was critical in the fall from power of Taiwan's ruling parties in 2000 and 2008 – as is often the case in democratic systems. History could repeat itself.

The economy

In 2008, the KMT also profited from blaming the DPP for poor government performance and the sluggish economy. The DPP's inability to get legislation through a KMT dominated parliament meant that it did not have much of a government record to run on in 2008. In contrast, the KMT pledged that if it won the election it would implement a "633" plan, which promised a six per cent economic growth rate, reducing unemployment to three per cent, and raising per capita income to US\$30,000. It has not come close to delivering any of these targets, an example of how the KMT raised quite unrealistic expectations during the 2008 campaign. The party's failure to deliver on these expectations has weakened its appeal to the crucial floating voters. Despite the KMT's huge majorities, it has been remarkably conservative domestically compared to previous reform minded administrations. In fact, the only major domestic policy initiative after three years in power was a reorganization of Taiwan's main administrative districts. This is not the kind of achievement likely to generate the voter passions we expect from Taiwanese presidential campaigns.

Despite these difficulties the KMT is likely to focus on economic issues again, reminding voters of the failures of the previous DPP administration, and also highlighting how the economy has recovered and how cross-Strait economic ties have benefitted Taiwan. For example, after negative growth in 2009, the 2010 growth rate was over 10 per cent and the forecast for 2011 is almost 5 per cent. It will also boast of its success in attracting Chinese tourists, increasing Chinese investment in Taiwan, and starting regular direct flights to China. In contrast the DPP will focus on the losers in the Taiwan's new economic environment, arguing that the cross-Strait deals just benefit big business and China. Thus it will play on the widespread concern that Taiwan is becoming an "M shaped society," with a widening gap between rich and poor. It will place particular emphasis on the small and medium enterprises, the unemployed, farmers, and workers. The way that the economy issue ultimately plays out in these upcoming elections will depend more on how swing voters perceive the state of the economy than government economic statistics. In 2007-8 though the economy was recovering, the KMT was able to convince voters that the DPP was to blame for Taiwan falling behind its Asian rivals. Therefore the KMT cannot take it for granted that voters will reward it even if growth continues and unemployment declines through 2011. It will instead depend on whose picture of the state of the economy voters find more persuasive. Nevertheless, traditionally the KMT has benefitted from the economic issue, and it is questionable whether the DPP's more leftist approach will pay dividends.

National identity

In almost every national election in Taiwan, national identity appeals are prominent. Through his cycle tour from the far south to the far north of Taiwan, what was known as his "long stay" campaign, and other initiatives, Ma was actually successful at projecting a moderate Taiwan identity image in 2008. Images of Ma up to his knees in mud in paddy fields, working with rural families in his "long stay" campaign, helped him remove his mainlander technocratic image. However, now that Ma is President he simply does not have the free time to spend days in the paddy fields, picking apples in orchards, or chilling out with the locals at the temple. Moreover, Ma's more friendly policies towards China mean that repeating the campaign methods that worked in 2008 are not likely to be especially persuasive for voters with strong Taiwanese identity today. On the other hand, while under Chen Shui-bian the DPP was seen as employing quite an exclusive and extreme identity message which scared off more moderate centrist voters, the two current DPP frontrunners have both tried to cultivate more moderate and inclusive identity images. Therefore the DPP will once again have an advantage on the Taiwan identity appeal.

Cross-Strait relations

Unlike in the recent local executive and legislative by-elections, cross-Strait and international relations will be high on the agenda in 2012. This will be a major challenge for both parties. Simply by not being Chen Shui-bian, Tsai Ing-wen has been able to look more moderate regarding China. However, at least so far, Tsai has been quite cautious on China policy. In the course of the 2000 campaign Chen did offer a moderate position on China in the form of the Resolution on Taiwan's Future. This document essentially accepted the Republic of China (ROC) as Taiwan's national title and argued that there is no need for Taiwan to declare independence as Taiwan is already independent. Thus far Tsai has not yet had the courage to allow the party to hold a China policy conference which has been planned but is long-delayed. The DPP has been able to fudge the issue in local elections but will need a clear and convincing position for the presidential election. This puts Tsai or Su Tseng-chang in a serious dilemma: if they take a position that has too much distance from the DPP's ultimate goal of a fully and de jure independent Taiwan they are likely to divide the party and lose core supporters, who may just stay at home. Therefore, it is likely that the DPP candidate will take a position that is almost identical to the Resolution on Taiwan's Future.

On a more practical level, an even more pressing challenge is how to convince voters that the DPP will be able to handle cross-Strait relations better than the decade of stalemate under Lee Teng-hui and Chen. Although the DPP is likely to accept most of the agreements reached between Taiwan and China since 2008, it still refuses to

recognize the so called “1992 consensus” that has been central to the renewed China-Taiwan talks. At least for the Taiwan government, the “1992 consensus” is a tacit agreement under which both sides accept there is one China, but have different interpretations about what one China means. The KMT will press the DPP candidate to explain how they will be able to continue cross-Strait talks while rejecting this formulation and, at least so far, the DPP does not seem to have an answer to this question.

Naturally the KMT will claim much credit for its cross-Strait breakthroughs and argue that this has benefitted Taiwan economically. Nevertheless, the China issue also will be a major challenge for President Ma. He has already achieved most of his original major objectives on China in his first term. These include direct flights to China, opening up to Chinese tourists and students, and the preliminary free trade pact known as ECFA. Ma’s challenge now is to explain what he plans to do next if he wins a second term. Ma is aware that moving too fast in China relations will risk alienating Taiwanese voters. He also faces increasing impatience from the Chinese side about his limited concession to their objectives of political talks and starting a process towards eventual unification. Ma knows how unpopular the concept of unification is in Taiwan, and in fact since he became president support for both independence and Taiwanese identity have actually risen significantly. In other words, closer economic integration has not helped China to win Taiwanese hearts and minds. The DPP will naturally warn that if Ma and the KMT retain office they will “sell out Taiwan” to China. Thus expect to see DPP advertisements showing images of KMT leaders shaking hands with Hu Jintao, Chinese missiles, and Taiwanese police roughly confiscating protestors’ ROC flags during a visit by a Chinese envoy. Ma will find it much harder to deal with the accusations that he is too China-friendly than he did in 2008.

A major factor in how the China issue will play out is China itself – specifically, how it deals with the election campaign in Taiwan. Naturally Beijing wants to see Ma re-elected, but making its support of Ma too obvious will only undermine his campaign. Taiwanese voters tend to have a low opinion of any politician seen as too subservient to the Chinese government. If China takes a strong stand on Taiwan, as we saw in 1996 and 2000, this will probably benefit its least preferred candidate. We should not be surprised if it does offer Ma some kind of help, such as withdrawal of some of the missiles targeted against Taiwan or not blocking Taiwan’s proposed Free Trade Agreement with Singapore. Nevertheless, Ma will try to keep some distance from China during the campaign. We can also anticipate Ma appearing on government TV advertisements, as he did in 2009 and 2010 campaigns, explaining that the ROC is a sovereign independent country. Such attempts to look strong on protecting Taiwan will infuriate nationalists in mainland China. In the run up to the election PRC statements on Taiwan are likely to stress their expectation that the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations is based on opposition to Taiwan independence and adherence to the 1992 consensus. Since the DPP is not going to accept this formulation, the PRC may well sternly warn voters of the consequences of making the “wrong choice.” Such warnings are likely to raise turnout and can benefit both parties. Some swing voters will then opt for the candidate taking a firm stand against China, but others, particularly the large constituency that have an economic stake in stable cross-Strait relations, may be persuaded their interests are best served by the KMT.

Vision for the future

A final challenge that both parties need to face is how to create a political vision to appeal to floating and also new voters. In the process of the DPP’s rise to power in the late 1990s, it was able to expand its support base with welfare pledges, calls to clean up Taiwan’s environment and crack down on political corruption. At least so far we do not have any clear idea of what the DPP’s new vision for Taiwan is; it will need much more than empty slogans. Instead it requires some vision of how to deal with pressing social issues such as the growing wealth disparities and how to strengthen Taiwan’s democratic system with political reforms. This will be equally challenging for the KMT as it has been so conservative domestically and, even if it retains unified government, it likely will not have the kind of legislative majority needed to push major reforms on its own. In 2008 the KMT was far more popular among the younger voters in their twenties and thirties. Although this group tends to be less likely to turn out to vote, they

have looser partisan ties than those above forty and, if motivated to vote, could represent a crucial swing constituency. The manner that police have dealt with student protestors and their new Wild Strawberry movement calling for the liberalization of the Parade and Assembly Law is likely to alienate many younger or first time voters in the forthcoming campaigns.

Challenges for the winner

Despite all President Ma's difficulties many observers do expect the KMT to retain its majority and for him to win reelection. Even if unified government is maintained, the KMT will have a much smaller parliamentary majority and so Ma will need to engage in real dialogue with the opposition and reach domestic consensus in a way that he was neither able nor willing to do in his first term. A second Ma administration will probably try to continue the gradual improvement of Taiwan-China relations but avoid any kind of talks that involve mention of unification or political integration. Although the government will then face increased impatience from China and Chinese nationalists for Ma's failure to speed up integration, Ma would have at least one card to strengthen his hand against China. With a weaker domestic position than he had in 2008, for example, President Ma could tell Beijing that he needs to move more slowly and carefully than in the first term. At the same time, however, Ma actually will meet greater domestic resistance to his policy initiatives in both cross-Strait relations and other areas.

A DPP victory in the presidential election is also possible. A new DPP administration would be unlikely to result in the kind of tensions seen in the Chen era, as the DPP will accept many of the agreements made by the Ma administration and attempt to avoid what the Beijing or Washington would take as provocative actions and language. Nevertheless, a DPP president would need to face the same critical problem that dogged the Chen government: how to rule with a KMT controlled legislature? Without control of the parliament, Chen was often limited to symbolic initiatives, such as the 2007 campaign against Chiang Kai-shek, who had been dead for 30 years. One of the most important lessons of the 2000-2008 DPP era is that Taiwan's parliamentary elections are as important if not more important than the presidential ones.

Taiwan's 2012 elections promise to be extremely competitive. The DPP has gone a long way in recovering from its collapse in 2008, but faces an uphill struggle to convince voters it is ready for national government again. After the KMT's decline in popularity in the first two years of the Ma administration, economic trends have contributed to its improving poll ratings. While we cannot rule out a DPP victory, the KMT is in a more advantageous position at this point to retain the presidency and control of the Legislative Yuan.