

Prospects for the January Legislative elections

<http://nottspolitics.org/2011/11/21/forecasting-the-legislative-elections/>

Watching Taiwan's forthcoming elections from the vantage point of London, it does seem like the presidential election is the only campaign taking place. The vast majority of both the Chinese and English print media coverage is concentrating on the struggle between Ma Ying-jeou and Tsai Ing-wen. The simultaneous legislative election in contrast is being largely neglected by the national media. As I have written in the Taipei Times, this is problematic from a perspective of democratic accountability. Under authoritarian rule Taiwan's parliaments were largely rubber stamp institutions. This is no longer the case in democratic Taiwan. The outcome of the Legislative Yuan election is as important if not more so than the presidential one. Without legislative majorities presidents are forced to either compromise with the majority party or face severe constraints, as we saw under the DPP era.

What are the prospects of these partly forgotten elections? Firstly, we can rule out a repeat of the Kuomintang's (KMT) landslides of 2008. On that occasion the KMT with its allies won three quarters of the seats on only about 50% of the vote share. It is also unlikely that the DPP would be able to cobble together even a wafer thin majority.

Looking through the 73 district races it seems to me that we can divide them into approximately a third which the KMT should win, another third where the Democratic Progressive (DPP) has a clear advantage and then a final third which could go either way. These swing districts are likely to determine whether the KMT is able to win a workable majority or will be reliant on the allies of questionable reliability, such as the Non Partisan Alliance and Soong Chu-yu's People First Party (PFP). Based on my initial predictions we may get see the KMT getting 40 district seats and the DPP 33. If they both gain 17 proportional representation (PR) seats each and the KMT and its allies win all six aboriginal seats, then we could get a Legislative Yuan with 63 KMT (including its allies) and 50 DPP seats. If we consider that in 2008 the DPP won a mere 13 district seats and 14 PR seats, then the DPP would be almost doubling its seats. Such a Legislative Yuan would offer genuine constraints in Ma's ability to dictate legislative politics.

What about other parties you are probably asking? These KMT totals include some seats for its allies. Thus for instance up to three Non Partisan Alliance candidates have a strong chance of winning, as does the one NP candidate, and also 3 PFP district candidates have a fighting chance of success. In 2008 the NP came the closest of the smaller parties to winning seats through the proportional district, gaining almost 4 percent vote share. However, this time I can only see the PFP having a chance of passing the 5% threshold, largely as a result of benefitting from Soong's presidential campaign.

Why is the outlook looking so different from 2008?

One variable that should favour the KMT is that it has an overwhelming incumbency advantage. IN contrast four years ago there was a rough balance between Pan Blue and Pan Green incumbent legislators. Back in 2008 the two elections were separated by three months, with the legislative

contest in January and presidential one in March. The KMT's landslide legislative majority in January gave it a significant momentum for the March presidential campaign. In 2012 the two elections are being held simultaneously. The KMT's motivation was to enable its legislators' vote mobilization to benefit its presidential candidate, while the DPP hopes for the reverse whereby a strong Tsai campaign will lift DPP legislative prospects. I am not sure who is right and there may well be regional variation in the effect. However, we can be sure that the voter turnout should be raised for the legislative election compared to 2008.

Back in 2008 KMT legislative candidates rode on the back of Ma's presidential campaign, but after almost four years of the Ma presidency many KMT legislators no longer view him as helpful for their re-election drive. Another major shift in the public mood is the disappearance of Chen Shui-bian from the agenda. In 2008 many voters (Blue and swing) viewed the elections as a chance to punish the DPP and Chen Shui-bian for the string of corruption scandals that emerged from late 2005. This issue has almost faded away today. Even the candidacy of Chen's son in Kaohsiung 9 has only created limited attention. While it is possible that Chen Chih-chung will split the Green vote sufficiently to allow the KMT to win that seat, his campaign has not generated much momentum yet or had any spill over effect beyond the district.

Under Tsai the DPP has created a sense that the party has put the Chen Shui-bian scandals behind it and recovered. This has been apparent in its improved performances in 2009 and 2010 local executive and city/county council elections. In 2010 executive and council elections the two main parties were essentially tied. That in itself represents an achievement for the DPP which had seemed down and out between 2005 and late 2008. One of the most remarkable developments in terms of legislative elections since 2008 has been the 12 legislative by-elections caused by resignations and corruption cases. The DPP won nine of these, including six which had been won by the KMT in 2008. The DPP also won in places such as Taitung and Hsinchu County, where in past it had sometimes not even bothered to nominate candidates. Naturally we need to be cautious about how we treat by-elections and it is quite possible that the KMT will regain control over some of these lost districts this time.

Another major difference between 2008 and today is in the field of nomination. In 2008 problems related to both presidential and legislative nomination served to create severe internal tensions within the DPP and undermine their campaigns. This time the process though less democratic, has gone much more smoothly. As far as I am aware there are no real DPP rebels proposing to stand against official DPP candidates and the party is looking much more united. At this stage it does appear that there are more potential KMT rebels threatening to stand and divide the KMT vote than in 2008.

A final area where the campaign looks very different is in the role of third parties. In 2008 the TSU took potential DPP votes in the PR section and also served to split the Green votes in many district races. This time the TSU will not nominate district candidates and has been weakened after four years out of parliament, so that it is unlikely to get more than 1-2 percent in the PR vote. In contrast the PFP is likely to have about a dozen district candidates; these will split the Blue vote in some districts. Both the NP and PFP will also take PR votes from the KMT. Lastly, in 2008 there was a plethora of other small parties contesting the PR vote section. Although they failed to get any seats or even get more than 1 percent, they did take votes away from the mainstream parties. This time

there is less enthusiasm to contest this election from small parties that are not splinters from the KMT or DPP. Of these challenger parties, perhaps only the Green Party will exceed 1 percent.

I will try to write something that looks at the districts and offers some more detailed predictions later. It is best to wait until legislative registrations are completed at the end of this week. There will be much pressure applied and money spent in the next few days to persuade rebels and allied party candidates not to stand. There will probably be some surprises too.

Dafydd Fell

Senior Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Studies

School of Oriental and African Studies

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