

Dafydd Fell's campaign impressions

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I have been back in Taiwan for a couple of weeks now, giving me a slightly different perspective from that in my office in London. Officially I have been on vacation in southern Taiwan until yesterday, and Kenting is not the best location for establishing the national election mood. However, I wanted to share a few initial impressions of the campaign.

A first one is that the enthusiasm level is lower than I have ever experienced in a presidential election. Although most of the audience at the New Year party probably were not old enough to vote, I was struck by how a passionate New Year music event in Taoyuan could go dead on Ma Ying-jeou's appearance. I have not found people enthusiastic about any of the candidates so far. Of course this may change as I widen my circles of conversation this week and start to attend some campaign events.

I have written separately about the way the presidential campaign has overshadowed the legislative campaign. Nevertheless, I have been pleased to see quite extensive media coverage of the legislative races at this stage. Actually on the ground legislative campaigning appears more extensive than the presidential one. Comparatively DPP candidates appear more willing to include Tsai Ing-wen in their campaign posters, but as Michael Turton has noted on his blog a high proportion of KMT candidates also have Ma on their street posters.

A second thing that I notice is the high degree of government purchased print and television advertising promoting government achievements. I know that this was a feature of previous elections, but my impression is that the level is higher this year. I can see it is important for citizens to understand what their government is doing, but the level of government paid advertising looks like an attempt at free advertising for the ruling party. Ideally what is needed is comparative statistics on the use of these kind of ads.

Thus age old problem of ruling party abuse of public office for electoral benefit appears as serious as at least the 1990s. Though a trivial case, the New Year party mentioned above exemplified this phenomenon. On the stage next to President Ma were the KMT legislative candidates for Taoyuan County seats, but none of the opposition party candidates. This was an event organized by the KMT controlled Taoyuan County government. I cannot be certain whether there were similar practices in DPP controlled counties but clearly this problem remains unresolved.

The third point is the role of the third party, the People First Party. For much of the late Chen Shui-bian era the PFP was in the process of being swallowed by the KMT, at most it was a semi-independent KMT faction. What is especially interesting this year is how the PFP and Soong Chu-yu are operating more like the New Party of the 1990s. In other words,

they are actually trying to maintain real distance from the parent party and attacking both sides. This was apparent from seeing PFP candidates appearing on pro Green talk shows and often being more critical of the KMT. It is still not certain how effective this will be in allowing the PFP to win a handful of legislative seats, but it does reflect a changed strategy by Soong. Also it reveals that there is a market to be tapped among voters that probably chose Ma in 2008 and are having second thoughts this time.

A last impression is how the KMT is trying to revive the ghost of Chen Shui-bian. The anti-Chen appeal did make a major impact on a number of campaigns from 2005-2008. By the 2008 presidential campaign Ma was strong enough that he could run a relatively positive campaign and no longer rely on the Chen ATM. Since this election is looking so close, Ma's team is trying to relink the DPP and Tsai to memories of the Chen era scandals. It is still unclear how effective this will be and given the poll blackout it will be harder than ever to judge the mood of the electorate.

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