

Student protests of March 2014 and the Red Shirts Movement

One of the challenges of studying Taiwan politics is that we often have too much information and data to cope with. Watching the development of the current occupation protests is no exception to the pattern. There are live feeds, constant updating of pictures, comments and analysis on social media, and that is before the coverage in traditional news media. Those on the spot are better able to analyse the intricacies of the current events, so I thought it might be useful to offer some comparative insights.

The natural movement to compare with is of course the Wild Lily Movement of 1990. This is important in showing how a demonstration could be successfully resolved in the way that President Lee was prepared to engage with the students. One of the central demands of the Wild Lily Movement was a national conference on democratic reform and interestingly the current occupation protests have proposed a similar consensus seeking conference. However, a crucial difference is that in 1990 Lee, the students, and the opposition party's positions were very similar. It was conservatives within Lee's own party, the KMT, that were marginalised. In contrast, today the students' demands are completely unacceptable to the current President Ma Ying-jeou. Since coming to power, Ma has concentrated on cross-Strait relations. The core argument has been cross-Strait economic integration is the key to solving Taiwan's economic problems, security and international space. For Ma to backtrack is like asking him to renounce his policy direction for the last six years.

In contrast, it seems to me a more fruitful comparison is with the Red Shirts anti corruption protests of 2006. The current protests are the largest Taiwan has seen since the Red Shirts. Both occurred after six years of the government being in office and at a time when the sitting presidents were highly unpopular and had been unpopular for a long period of time. Another similarity is that in both cases there has been no genuine reflection on the protestors' demands by government or any attempts to engage in dialogue with the protestors. In both cases, the presidents had increasingly appeared to be lame duck presidents. Naturally there are significant differences. The Red Shirts were largely a top down movement, led by politicians rather than social movement activists. Moreover, Ma should be in a much stronger political position given his presidential and parliamentary majorities from 2012. In contrast, the DPP lacked a majority in parliament throughout its time in the presidency.

The question now then must be whether the movements will see similar conclusions and consequences. It is easy to dismiss the Red Shirts as a failure as it disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. The resulting Home Party (紅黨) had almost no impact in the subsequent 2008 elections. Some in the DPP thought they had survived the crisis and were given a false sense of security by their performance in the 2006 elections. However, the Red Shirts succeeded in a critical way. The DPP's failure to really deal with its image of political corruption meant that the issue remained the dominant issue for the remainder of the DPP's second term. The KMT was able to win in 2008 by framing the election as a referendum on Chen's corruption scandals.

So what will be the long term outcome and consequences of this movement we are witnessing today? It seems unlikely that the movement will suddenly disappear even if the violent crackdown and clearing of government buildings continues. One possibility is that protestors will follow Ma in the way that the licenced prostitutes' movement harassed Chen Shui-bian in the late 1990s. However,

the scale of such following protests is likely to be much larger than those seen in the late 1990s. But will the issue of the Services Pact and China relations remain the dominant issue for 2016? In 2012 the China issue was advantageous for the KMT, but will this be the case in 18 months time? It seems inevitable that protestors will try to frame 2016 as a referendum on Ma and Jiang and their handling of the crackdown and Services Agreement.

In 2006 the Red Shirt demonstrations served to strengthen the opposition KMT in the run up to 2008. However, it seems uncertain on the effect of the current demonstrations on party politics. The DPP has struggled to find a role as social movements remain suspicious of it and it has tended to be on the sidelines of most of the post 2008 protests. If some kind of party is established out of these protests it is unlikely to be able to make a breakthrough in Taiwan's electoral system. It is possible the Green Party Taiwan will be able to make a breakthrough in 2014 and 2016 but its impact will be limited at most. Another related difference I see is that in late 2006 at least from a Pan Blue perspective there was a sense that the KMT was ready to take over. The KMT-CCP agreements of 2005 had given a blueprint of how the KMT would transform cross-Strait relations. In contrast despite the unpopularity of the Ma government, there is not yet the sense that the DPP is a government in waiting with a clear vision for the future.

One other potential consequence will be how the current crisis affects the KMT. In 2006 the Red Shirt protests did serve to split the DPP between those more supportive and critical of Chen. It is quite likely that some KMT politicians will try to appeal to voters by keeping a distance from Ma. This is particularly likely to be significant if Ma has a clear preferred nominee for presidential succession. It appears that some leading KMT politicians are taking a cautious position on the student protests, waiting to see how the events develop and how public opinion swings

A final thought is the effect on the overall political atmosphere in Taiwan. Back in 2006 the Red Shirts phenomenon increased the level of political polarization in Taiwan. This had already started in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election. However, in 2005 it was still possible to pass constitutional reform and a short-lived agreement was made between Chen and PFP leader Soong Chu-yu. In contrast in the aftermath of the Red Shirts there was a much clearer trend of parties moving to more extreme positions and raised inter-party hostility. I think it is very likely we will see a similar pattern in the final period of the second Ma term. However, the difference is that a key player in this new hostile political atmosphere will be civil society. This new level of political polarization is likely to be visible in continued protests in the streets but also we should expect highly antagonistic inter-party relations in parliament.