

## **The battle for third place: Prospects for Taiwan's small parties in its November local elections**

On November 29 Taiwan will hold its Nine in One Local Elections. This refers to the nine different types of elections that range from special municipality mayors such as for Taipei City down to village and neighbourhood chiefs at the grassroots level. These elections are extremely important for a number of reasons. They are the first nation-wide elections held since the presidential and parliamentary elections of January 2012. Thus they can be seen as a mid-term test for President Ma's administration and can offer an insight into the prospects for national elections in early 2016. Coming seven months after the Sunflower social movement, these elections also can serve as a test over whether that social movement has had a transformative effect on Taiwan's political landscape.

The majority of media and academic attention has focused on Taiwan's leading parties the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) and the main opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This is not surprising given that they have dominated the party system since the advent of multi-party politics in the late 1980s. However, there have been periods over the last two and a half decades when alternative parties have won significant numbers of national and local level seats.

A number of smaller parties are attempting to make an impact in these upcoming local elections. It does appear that the overall political environment is more favourable for alternative parties than in the previous rounds of equivalent elections. The election system being used in the local council elections uses multi-member districts and operates in a semi-proportional way, thus giving more space to smaller parties than under first past the post. Another advantage is the unpopularity of the mainstream parties. Despite coming to power on landslide victories in 2008 and winning re-election in 2012, during Ma's second term he has suffered historic lows in presidential approval surveys. However, the main opposition party has also struggled to expand its support base beyond its core of about a third of the electorate. In many ways the spring Sunflower movement was caused by the failures of mainstream party politics.

Thus the smaller parties are trying to profit from the growing alienation from regular party politics and have nominated quite extensively. There are two types of smaller parties contesting the local assembly elections. These are splinter parties from the mainstream parties that focus their campaigning on issues related to Taiwan's national identity and relations with China, and challenger parties that are attempting to appeal to voters with a completely different set of issue appeals.

The splinter parties have tended to be the more successful than the challenger parties, with a long-term record of winning local and national seats since the mid 1990s. These can be sub-divided between those closer to the DPP or the Pan Greens and splinters from the KMT or the Blue Camp.

The major splinter party on the Green side of politics is the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). It had been the fourth largest party for most of the DPP era (2000-2008) but then collapsed between 2008 and 2010, losing almost all its seats. However, it enjoyed a revival in 2012, winning three parliamentary seats and 9 percent of the party list vote. With 41 councillor candidates it is the largest nominator among the smaller parties and will probably come third overall in votes and seats. It has taken advantage of the DPP's perceived moderation on China issues and public concern over the dangers of rapid economic and political integration with China. The debates this year over the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement has meant that China-Taiwan relations are more salient than is usually the case for local elections.

KMT splinter parties nominating candidates include the New Party (NP), People First Party (PFP) and China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP). The NP was once Taiwan's third largest party, winning about 15 percent of seats and votes in the mid 1990s. However, it was almost wiped out in national elections after 2001 and has only retained a foothold in its last stronghold of Taipei city council. Its core appeal is closer political integration with China and Chinese nationalism, and is thus the relevant party closest to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). These close political links mean it also has greater financial resources than the other small parties. It has attempted to profit from those opposed to the Sunflower movement. For instance, its candidate Wang Bing-chung made a name for himself on TV call-in shows attacking the Sunflower movement. In Taipei City the NP has also closely supported the KMT mayoral candidate Lian Sheng-wen. This time the NP has nominated 19 assembly candidates. Whether the NP is able to increase its seats will be a useful barometer for the popularity of Chinese nationalist appeals among Taiwanese voters. Even more extreme than the NP is the CUPP led by former gangster boss Chang An-le (White wolf). This grouping is contesting elections for the first time with an even more pro-unification stance than the NP. Chang also raised the profile of his party by bringing a group of gangster supporters to confront the Sunflower protesters outside the Legislative Yuan. However, the CUPP appears to be targeting 2016 rather than 2014.

Traditionally the PFP is viewed as belonging to the Pan Blue camp and was the third largest party during the DPP era; however, it has tended to be much vaguer on the national identity spectrum than its rival the NP. Moreover, it made its break with the KMT by challenging it in the legislative and presidential elections in 2012. Its representatives on TV call in shows have tried to criticise both sides. In 2014 the PFP has the second highest number of candidates (36) among the smaller parties. Apart from a few incumbents and well known former councillors, the PFP candidates face an uphill battle in November. This is because the party has struggled to find an identity and role for itself since the 2012 elections.

Perhaps the most interesting development this year is the proliferation of parties that can be categorized as challenger parties that stress a distinct set of issue appeals to the mainstream parties. These parties and associated independent candidates have been

prominent in the revived social movements of the post 2008 era that culminated in the Sunflower movement. One such new entrant that could be loosely termed leftist is the People's Democratic Front (PFP), with 13 councillor candidates. It has a mixture of new and experienced candidates with rich social activist experience. It has particularly stressed a range of niche issues such as the rights of immigrants, sex workers, the homeless and the handicapped. In previous elections PFP candidates had used campaigns primarily as a means of raising awareness of neglected social issues. This educational goal remains the priority in 2014 but their campaign is much more professionally organized.

The challenger party that has most consistently joined elections over the last two decades has been the Green Party Taiwan (GPT). Although it came fifth in the last legislative elections with a quarter of a million votes, this fell short of the required five per cent to win seats. Since 2012 it has been able to expand beyond its core environmental and anti nuclear appeal by adding gay rights, animal rights, land justice and opposition to the death penalty. It has tried to appeal to younger voters by calls for reducing the voting age to 18, nominating young and in some cases openly gay candidates. The GPT's leadership have been prominent in a broad range of social movements and have tried to frame the party as a representative voice for civil society. With 9 councillor candidates, the GPT has run its most serious campaign since 1996. It looks likely to make a breakthrough and could become the fourth largest party. However, even here the picture is not entirely rosy. For instance, numerous former GPT candidates have chosen to stand as independents and one former party manager even switched to the TSU. Even more damaging is the fact that one of the party's stars Pan Han-sheng split away to establish a new party known as the Tree Party, nominating 10 candidates, mainly in the GPT's traditional base of Taipei City. Another worrying sign for challenger parties is that they have nominated candidates against each other in some districts in Taipei and Keelung.

So what are the overall prospects for smaller parties? The unpopularity of mainstream parties offers a historic opportunity for these smaller parties to make a breakthrough. We can predict that the splinter parties will again perform better than the new challenger parties, but the challengers are likely to win a number of seats for the first time and bring in alternative voices to assemblies for the first time. Greater diversity in Taiwan's party system should be beneficial for its democracy.

Looking further ahead to 2016 the national legislative election will be challenging for smaller parties. Legislative elections will again be overshadowed by the simultaneous presidential election. Moreover, parties will again face the challenge of exceeding the five percent threshold for seats. While the TSU probably has the strength to exceed this, the other splinters such as NP and PFP are likely to struggle. There is the potential for the alternative civil society groupings to make a breakthrough and the creation of the Taiwan Citizen Union this year is aiming for 2016. However, it remains to be seen whether civil society groups can

find a way to work together. The fragmentation of civic groupings after the Sunflower occupation suggests this will not be easy.