

## Local elections 2022: The squeezed space for Taiwan's alternative parties

Soon after the election results were confirmed, Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) announced her resignation as chair of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This follows a precedent set in earlier local elections in 2014 and 2018, whereby the chairperson of Taiwan's ruling party resigned to take responsibility for defeat. Much of the initial media coverage has framed these local election results as a Kuomintang (KMT) landslide victory. The KMT is undoubtedly boosted by its ability to hold on to its gains from 2018 but also to recover cities that had long been viewed as KMT strongholds, such as Taipei City, Keelung and Taoyuan. However, when looked at in more detail, it is clear that while 2014 and 2018 were earthquake elections, 2022 appears more like a maintaining election. Brian Hioe has thus described these results as representing the 'Maintenance of Pan-Blue Status Quo in Taiwanese Local politics.'<sup>1</sup>

While in 2018 the media largely concentrated on the contest for Kaohsiung mayor, this time the focus was mainly on the Taipei, Hsinchu and Taoyuan City local executive races. One realm that has largely escaped media attention has been the city and county council elections. Here the picture looks rather different from the KMT landslide conclusions in the media. The KMT's vote share actually fell from 40.3 in 2018 to 37.7 percent in 2022 and its council seats fell from 394 to a historic low of 367. In contrast, the DPP increased its vote share from 31 percent to 33.2 and rose from 238 seats in 2018 to 277 this year.

In recent years, there has been growing dissatisfaction with the two mainstream parties, but they have continued to dominate the party system. In the aftermath of the 2014 Sunflower Movement, a number of alternative parties emerged to challenge the KMT-DPP. These included parties that have their roots in Taiwan's civil society, such as the Green Party Taiwan (GPT) and the New Power Party (NPP), as well as the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) created by the Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) in 2019. The NPP won its first seats in the 2016 parliamentary election and followed up winning 16 council seats in the last round of local elections in 2018. The TPP also entered Taiwan's parliament in 2020 in its first election, becoming the third largest party. Therefore an important test for the 2022 local elections was whether the small parties would be able to add to the diversity of Taiwan's party system.

The general picture in 2022 is one of the challenger parties being further squeezed out of the party system. After the two main parties, the third largest party in the 2022 elections was the TPP, winning Hsinchu City mayor and 14 council seats. However, its impact should not be exaggerated. Despite its greater financial resources compared to other small parties, only 14 out of the TPP's 86 candidates were elected. Given these results, the party may struggle to be competitive in the next round of national elections in 2024. Its only hope is likely to be to rely on its legislative candidates benefitting from Ko running a strong presidential campaign. Although many in Taiwan's civil society were originally supportive of Ko Wen-je when he first won the mayoral election in 2014, many of those supporters have drifted away. The generally vague ideological or conservative policy stances of the TPP means it is questionable how much it adds to the diversity of the party system.

After its 2016 national election success, there were hopes that Taiwan's largest movement party, the NPP, could become a major player in the party system. It made an important breakthrough in the 2018 local elections, winning 16 council seats. However, since then, it has suffered from party infighting, scandals and numerous defections. In these local elections the NPP suffered its worst setback to date, falling from 16 to just 6 councillors elected out of its 46 candidates. The party

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newbloommag.net/2022/11/26/2022-election-results/>

appears to have over nominated but also wasted valuable resources contesting unwinnable local executive races. Perhaps even more than the TPP, the NPP is at greater risk of losing its parliamentary representation in 2024.

In addition to the NPP, a number of other parties with their roots in Taiwan's civil society nominated extensively in 2022. These included the Taiwan State Building Party (TSBP), GPT, Obasen Alliance, Social Democratic Party, Labor Party, as well as numerous independents with social movement backgrounds. But their overall performance was also much worse than four years earlier. After two unsuccessful attempts in 2014 and 2018, the TSBP finally won its first two local seats this year. However, even here there was a degree of disappointment about the low success rate of its candidates, with only two out of 26 elected.

The squeezed space for movement party candidates was seen in two GPT campaigns in 2022. It had run strong national campaigns in 2016 and 2020 and was seeking to build on its local seats gained in 2014 and 2018. The GPT's co-convenor Yu Hsiao-ching (余筱菁) had come third in six-seat Hsinchu County District 8 in 2014. Since then she had become one of the best known councillors in the county, developing both a strong social media profile and local support networks. However, four years later her vote share collapsed from 12.3 to 5.7, falling to 9<sup>th</sup> place in the district. Another representative case of the hostile environment for alternative candidates came in Taipei City District 5. In 2022 the GPT nominated a council candidate in Taipei City for the first time since 2010. Zoe Lee (李菁琪) is the party's secretary general and a former parliamentary candidate. She also is a human rights and environmental lawyer, award winning podcaster and is well known as a campaigner for the legalization of cannabis. Despite nominating a candidate with such an impressive CV, Lee only managed to get 1 percent of the vote, far below the lowest successful candidate's 8.5 percent in this eight-seat district.

Another sign of the challenging climate for the alternative politics could be seen in the way a number of candidates who were associated with the 2014 Sunflower Movement also failed to win election. For instance, one of the Sunflower movement's former spokespersons Huang Yu-fen (黃郁芬) failed in her bid to be re-elected in Taipei City Council. Huang had built a reputation as a very professional city councillor and had strong endorsements from civil society figures. She was also perhaps the first city council candidate to campaign while heavily pregnant and actually give birth during the campaign. Nevertheless, she fell to 14<sup>th</sup> in the 12 seat Taipei City District 1 in 2022.

A common problem has been that rather than cooperating, the alternative parties have often undermined each other by standing in the same districts. This is not a new phenomenon, as in 2018 the NPP appeared to target GPT candidates in order to damage the prospects of its rival movement party. One such example of alternative party competition was San Min District in Kaohsiung City, where the TSBP and NPP have both nominated in 2018 and 2022. Although the NPP's Lin Yu-kai (林子凱) had worked hard to build up his local support base since being elected in 2018 and received significant media attention, he saw his vote share fall from 8.1 to 6.4 percent and failed in his re-election bid in 2022. This time it was the TSBP candidate that won in this districts. There was a similar picture in the case of Hsinchu County District 8 mentioned earlier, as the GPT's Yu had to compete against a TPP and NPP candidate. In the end, none made it into the top six. In other cases the DPP played a bigger role in the poor performance of alternative parties. For instance, in Hsinchu County District 1 the DPP nominated a former GPT council candidate, Ou Yang-ting (歐陽霆), in the same district as one of the most promising GPT party candidates. After narrowly failing to get elected for the GPT in 2018, Ou won four years later with mainstream party backing.

Based on the 2022 results it is hard to see any of the movement parties being competitive on their own in the 2024 national elections. For such parties to remain in parliament in the next round of elections, it will require a broad civil society party alliance and one that goes beyond the GPT SDP Alliance seen in 2016. Failure to work together will probably lead to the disappearance of movement parties from parliament and ultimately a less diverse party system.