

## Political Polarization and Democratic Process in Taiwan: Implications for Cross-strait Relations

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### Abstract

The outcomes of the Chinese civil war coupled with other coincident occurrences were among the key factors and forces that led the Nationalist party retreat to Taiwan branching out from the communist government in the mainland China. In the post-Martial law Taiwan, political divisions, which started flourishing in 1986, paved the way for internal political struggles outside the KMT for the first time in Taiwan political history. Polarization has steadily become cogent, and one of the ambitious tasks to the yet Taiwan's growing democracy. Taiwanese domestic politics is determined by multiple vicissitudes including cross-Strait relations. Alternatively, different groups adhere to political viewpoints favoring either unification, independent and/or status quo. As per the theory, these motions have to deal with foreign policy of the island directly, simply because trades and investments alongside diplomatic ties can be determined not only by the group or individual decision making, but also by the domestic population as well.

**Keywords:** Polarity and democratic process; Cross-strait perspective; Miraculous transition; Political situation

### Introduction

Notwithstanding Taiwan is non-member of the United Nations since 1971, many experts including Larry Diamond, have categorized it is democracy as liberal one. This makes Taiwan one of the only three countries that have liberal democracy in Asia, the remaining are Japan and South Korea. Actually, Taiwan, for the past fifteen years on, actualizes what seen as 'earth-shattering' democratic consolidation. Again, if one accepts the 'article of faith' with double transitions of power between the two opposition parties, where colossus and political dignitaries altogether appear to have no objection or doubt that now onward; democracy wins sentiments of the Taiwanese people, and therefore deserves to accredit leadership.

Cumulatively, the human race settles down in Taiwan for the last 15,000 years back coincident with the age of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic. There are heat debates over the nature of the people who populated Taiwan as a place inhabited by humankind for the first time. Some scholars say that the pioneer people to populate the area were the people of Malayo-Polynesians origin who specifically influx from modern day Indonesia. Others believe that they were northerners, the people who were from south-eastern side of mainland China. Henceforth, Taiwan always have been but part of China [1].

Taiwan, officially Republic of China (ROC) is an island situated in East Asia, bordering People Republic of China to the west, Japan to the northeast and Philippines in the south; Taipei is the capital city and centre of administration. Ma Ying-jeou is the incumbent president (2012-2016). The Taiwan's president is elected directly by Taiwanese people for the duration of four-year term (renewable) with a unitary semi-presidential type of government; five government branches namely: Executive Yuan (composes of Cabinet), Legislative Yuan, Judiciary Yuan, Control Yuan (covers finance and audit department)

and Examination Yuan (controls civil service examination). Taiwan has 23,373,790 (2015 estimate) population.

Ethnic groups such as Han Chinese, Hokkien, Hakka, Mainlanders, and Aboriginal altogether shape Taiwanese ethnicity, and of course, generate the population. People in Taiwan consider themselves Taiwanese and or Chinese [1].

Taiwan's transition to democracy is believed to have been influenced by so many internal rectifications demonstrated by the authoritarian nationalist Kuomintang party (KMT) during the 1980s and early 1990s. The party's move was also considered as doorway for the 1996 first democratic presidential elections. KMT has been able to transform its manifesto and accommodate changes putting heavy weight on the future ambition of the Taiwanese people. This was not less than true liberalism and democratic leadership within their territorial boundaries.

Four years later, somewhere in 2000, another smoother transition took place to chance the long opposition party DPP occupies the highest office in the country. Tremendously, this remains a remarkable improvement and chancy business at the same time simply because it leaves the island so much vulnerable to the political polarity, which could easily influence stagnation or even, at maximum, thwart the admiration of achieving unbreakable standard model of democracy.

Political polarization is considered in the contextual view of political parties and democratic systems of government. According to Dave Manuel (online portal), polarization in the global politics refers to the situation when public opinion goes into two extreme divergences with no middle ground. For example, the Republic and Democrats in the United States are increasingly polarized in the sense that there is no common ground between them. Meanwhile, the two sides in many occasions disagreed to have common policy on many key issues such as economy, health, military spending, etc.

Political polarization has become much clear in Taiwan's internal politics specifically after each of the two major parties has so far get the

opportunity to administer the nation for the duration of two-term tenure between 2000 and 2016 in the first round.

For example, on 19th March 2004, a day to the presidential elections (contested by the president Chen Shui-bian seeking second term) the then incumbent president under the platform of DPP was targeted in an allegedly assassination plot. Similar incidence had happened in 1980s when Chen claimed that he was poisoned in tea by KMT aide. After his presidency, the new elected government under Ma Ying-jeou of KMT awarded Mr. Chen life imprisonment and fined him US\$6.13 million over the allegation of bribery, malfeasance, embezzlement and money laundering.

### **Polarity and Democratic Process in Taiwan, a Cross-Strait Perspective**

Republic of China (ROC) was one of the founding members of the United Nations at the end of the Second World War in 1945. Nearly three decades later, due to the lack of international recognition, the (ROC) lost her seat as Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council (P-5), which has gone to the People Republic of China (PRC) following her expelling from the United Nations by Resolution 2758. Subsequently, Taiwan, under the KMT led-government started suffering from the international diplomatic isolation, which lasted until today.

This sporadic intermittence indeed paralyzes Taiwan, and polarizes its internal politics into two wings: Pan-Blue Coalition political groups comprise those support unification with mainland China, and choice Chinese identity rather than separate Taiwanese. The second is Pan-Green Coalition group of who favour independence with new Taiwanese national identity. The current incumbent Taiwanese president set out democracy, economic development, and equitable wealth distribution as conditions to achieve the goal of unification. However, this alliance rejects the immediate unification until if PRC can entertain these together with other conditions including permission to return the body of Chiang Kai-Shek to his ancestral place in the mainland China.

Romer Cornejo argues that the expel was one of the first heavy blows that hit Taiwan only to serve an extraordinary force toward democratic transitional exercise overtaking the old authoritarian system, which has been embolden by the Kuomintang nationalist party. Since then, Taiwan manages democratization and transformation gradually until 1996 when it gone for her first historic presidential polls ever happened in modern day Taiwan.

In the first-two year period, the president Chen's administration take what could had been a totally opposite direction from the previous administration to shape the island policy in and outside the country. These were set of trends that affect various sectors, and decentralized the direction of Taiwan's domestic politics. Parenthetically, Republic of China (ROC) replaced by Taiwan on passport and other travelling documents. Nevertheless, school curriculums are being revised to centralize much of their focuses on mainstream Taiwan instead of ROC which, according to Chen, is synonymous word to mainland China. These and other key issues are among the absolutely opposite aims of the KMT.

This did not catch many experts of East Asian and Taiwanese domestic politics by surprise, simply because DPP emerged as the first opposition native party in Taiwan; and secondly, the party come to being alongside political movements demanding democracy and

reforms during the 1970s and 1980s. These characterizations empower the party in trying to ensure desinicizing Taiwanese identity and culture. With the development of modern technology and awareness, cultural and ideological domination is becoming seldom. Hence, the Taiwan's political structure evolves very rapidly, and the demands for democracy especially among the young men and women whom were born some 25-35 years ago, are reasonably so high.

Such changes and revisions seemed chiefly general. They carried out a palpable slogan of political implications in Taiwan during the DPP led administration. The occurrences are capable to axiomatically identify the classical stance of the two political groups and their roles in shaping the domestic politics of Taiwan; and thus, in both of the cases, the implications toward cross-strait relations are extensively clear. Therefore, one must not forget that, the paralysis of diplomatic isolation which has been disturbing Taiwan for many decades, are fruits of the factors that have direct contact with what is popularly referred as 'Cross-Strait relations' to avoid possible interwoven in the given terminology.

Interestingly, the two camps (KMT and DPP), despite their divergent policy mainly on China, still they appear to seek common ground on many issues including fighting corruption, upgrading social welfare and infrastructure, though during the DPP led administration, there were several derelictions as well as charges on corruption and malfeasance tragedies in government, and of course it has been the source of allegation against the party.

These elections served as first incremental test of democratization process in the island. Although holding regular elections or multiplying party organizations alone does not necessary grant stable state of democracy; democratic institutions must get support from the various interest groups only they can operate appropriately. Several nations in the third world underwent this kind of political therapy individually, but lacking strong political institutions is yet affecting their efforts.

Over the past four decades or so, multiple vicissitudes try to shape the Taiwanese democratization agenda. This transformation has drastically started somewhere in the late 1970s and early 1980s; just like many other countries in the world only to coincide what Samuel Huntington themed "third wave" when dozens of nondemocratic nations across the world have fully or partially converted to democratic political system.

This move has particularly increased the numbers of democracies especially in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. However, this could not aggregately end the authoritarian regimes, but was able to undermine their prolonging influences in more than one part of the world compared to the 1950s and 1960s or even earlier. During those days, Taiwan was struggling for self-government, and determination; denied by the government of People Republic of China (PRC). Moreover, the communist government was in support of North Korea's intention to invade the South in June, 1950. This was an alert that made United States to resume direct military ties with the Republic of China (ROC) or Taiwan immediately. Subsequently, in 1954 U.S. signed mutual military defence treaty with ROC [1]. This ratification remained in force for three decades serving as one of the longest mutual agreement between U.S. and ROC.

As for Taiwan, the period covered between 1950s and early 1980s that turmoil was not just internal political imbalance, but it was also threat by nearby neighbouring China. PRC was bidding for one, and the only China. This policy aimed at thwarting political legitimacy and

self-determination of Taiwan. In the recent contemporary time, Taiwan's democratization process appears to be one of the most successful democratic stories in the world.

Despite the transition had, from the very beginning, been launched through what could be seen as soft pressure, it was also aptly incremental in nature. Initially, the process was a transition from within the authoritarian nationalist single party, the KMT. The party's move was doorway for the future presidential elections of 1996. KMT transformed its manifesto to accommodate and pave the way for future and long awaited ambition of Taiwanese people. This was not less than true liberalism and democratic leadership within their territorial boundaries. Four years later, another smoother transition took place by electing president from the long opposition party DPP in the year 2000.

Throughout this gentle process of liberalization, with the exception of the 1947 massacre in which thousands of peoples were murdered by Chiang Kai-shek's troops [2]; the step-by-step moving toward stable state of democracy in Taiwan is said to be quite peaceful. Although, the process, according to Shelley Rigger, consolidation of democratic atmosphere in Taiwanese environment was not that easy, because it was such kind of series of pressures and counter-pressures, compromises, negotiations and pacts between the authoritarian regime led by KMT and other opponent groups, which managed to consume many lives whose belonged to the membership of both parties. Nevertheless, at the end it had brought about smoother political change in Taiwan more than ever before, and placed the country ahead of many other nations in the third world in terms of peaceful political transition [3].

Some writers such as Christian Schafferer, argue that the deep legacies that had been left behind by the authoritarian government together with prolonging martial law (1949-1987) have become undeniable challenges to newly democratic consolidation especially after electing DPP into office in 2000 [2].

The sentimental attachment of political domination in the post-war Taiwan, have of course changed the mainland Chinese nationalism to more specifically and narrowly Taiwan patriotism ideology in the 1990s. This has created political frontier between the two places, People/Republic of China (mainland China and Taiwan), and marked more political opening and wider democratization in Taiwan [3].

The KMT, which happened to serve political desire in mainland China for long time, 70 percent of its members during the 1980s were of Taiwan nationals. Despite the fact that the party's 2.4 million members were Taiwanese, mainland Chinese members occupied the important key positions of the party. Apart from this, second blow that hit the party was internal fragile over the contents of the proposed reformation exercise. The moderate KMT members whose were composed of both mainlanders Chinese and Taiwanese have come clearly in supporting the proposed demand of political reform in Taiwan giving the special emphasis on reformation of the internal structure of the KMT political platform itself [1]. Rigger [3] considers this as one of the unique factors that try to shape the political development in Taiwan over a long period.

### **The Post-2000 Miraculous Transition and Political Scandals: Challenge for Cross-Strait Politics**

On March 10, 2000, Taiwan held presidential elections. Results of the elections were in favour of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)

candidate. Thus, the official winning declaration of these elections opened a new historic page in Taiwanese politics. Previously, the DPP party played the role of opposition for decades gathering its political experience only on local government matters. In the first half of its first tenure of office, Taiwan seemed to experience hard economic recession along with record of high growth of unemployment for the first time in many years. To favour Taiwan, this has circuitously demonstrated the natural need with the revision of cross-strait ties.

Nevertheless, the palpable division in mainly governmental branches, which stood as challenge to the ruling DPP was also observed. The presidency and executive were on the control of DPP, whereupon KMT was even then, able to secure the majority seats in the parliament: dove versus hawk. Four years later, on the eve of the 2004 presidential polls, Chen Shui-bian the DPP presidential candidate, was targeted in a failed assassination attempt. This together with other related political crises followed the elections, which took place during the two terms of office served by the DPP, sent a signal that the DPP political tactics and ideal strategies are feebly insufficient.

These incidences have precisely undermined the democratic confidence of domestic and international stances. The subsequent disputes of the 2004 elections won by the DPP, once again forced KMT supporters to use political violence showing their dissatisfaction toward the future leadership of the winning party not only because of their political affiliation with the opposition party KMT but also because the country witnessed certain amount of economic stresses ever for many years. As a new ruling party, DPP had has to readjust its internal structures and platforms so to be able to face the challenge of leading a country that experienced one-party governing style for several decades in which even after the transition to democracy in 1996 the same party managed to transform its manifesto so to fit democracy mandates.

This indeed, makes DPP the first opposition party to secure the highest political office in Taiwan throughout this wave of democratization process. Subsequently, the challenge has been establishing a loose alliance between different groups as noticed by Hermann Halbeisen. According to him, the party has to develop such kind of structural design, which could make it powerful to accommodate as many factions as possible with conflicting opinions and views so to keep aloof from centralizing power within the frame of party leadership. Lack of sufficient coordination of the activities of the president and executive, created a wide gap in the quality of DPP led administration [4].

During this period of two terms of DPP led administration, many records of serious political scandals observed in the government offices and parastatals specifically in the first half of the second term. The unexpected poor performance of the DPP was 'grist to the mills' for KMT as it has been able to occupy presidency after the 2008 presidential polls. This because many Taiwanese including DPP members, lost their faithful confidence in the party commitment to tackle out many social and economic matters, and couldn't strongly fight corruption and clean government from KMT's long-term aberrant ruling. The DPP claimed that KMT-reappearing is automatic return of tyranny, but the vocalization seems very much inactive and forlorn just like its poor performance while in control [5].

Despite the nature and structural features of KMT, and in spite of being the only party to run the government, which was all-powerful, it took her fifty years or so to surrender to corruption, whereupon DPP

lost the battle to the same corruption in less than eight years of time [6].

### Political Situation in the Post-World War II Taiwan

From the very essence, the dawn of Taiwan's democratization linked with the incidences of the post-World War II directly. The most important one started with the fall of Japan to the allied forces. Many experts assumed that in the time to come, democratization process would get a 'head start' within the Taiwan's society.

To understand the contextual implications of this process, we need to reconsider the capitulation of Japan during the 1945, the year that marked the end of the World War II. The victory of the allied nations against Nazism and Fascism of Germany and Italy under Hitler and Mussolini respectively, and their associates, had automatically terminated Japanese control on Taiwan and set the island within the brackets of freedom and autonomy. Perhaps, this was (if not the first), among the most important events marked the first step toward liberalization in Formosa (latterly Taiwan). Japan was able to expand their control on Taiwan after the evacuation of Chinese Qing rulers that ended their thirteen years control (from 1887 to 1895).

The Taiwan Communiqué published by the International Committee for Human Rights (1996) penned down that before the influx of the imperial China, the island did not experience domination by any external conqueror. After coming across a lot of political seizures and turmoil somewhere in the mid of the 20th century, Taiwan's democratization and political transformation keep taking place in piecemeal with gradual changes in government and society as well. Although amid this gradual motion, many issues were raised especially those focused against KMT. Interestingly, in spite of the political disorder, the Taiwan's political process was not stagnant.

In the post-World War II Taiwan witnessed different realities such as party decamping especially from the then all-powerful ruling party, the KMT, merging with other parties or forming a new political group and independent. Indeed this factor plays role in creating multiple political organizations in Taiwan. It nevertheless, paved the way for stronger opposition in Taiwanese political life. Right from the start, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) participated in the elections of 1970. In 1994 and 2000 dozens of KMT mainstream members branched out due to the internal wrangling of KMT as a result, Chinese New Party (CNP), People First Party (PFP) of James Soong, and Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) created by the afterthought of former president elected under the platform of KMT Lee Teng-hui [7].

The internal disintegration that seemed to be fruits of asymmetric ideologies and logical interferences among the KMT's memberships, the party which remained in power for so many years, have with the aid of other different factors, automatically enhanced the chance for political democratization in Taiwan. Apart from this, KMT faced similar challenge on the hand of DPP and other oppositions and independent candidates too. The party managed to hold power

standstill, until the 2000 presidential elections. This means it was not that effete to accept destruction by such oppositions because the then internal crisis and disunity of the party were not strong enough to split it into pieces as it does in 1994 and 2000. Hence, the challenge of the post-2000 elections was much more catastrophe especially after its former chairperson, Mr. Lee withdrawn his membership from the party.

Thanks to these differences as they led to multiple perceptions in the views and perspectives of the members for it to leave the KMT party handicap. Many scholars consider this as a freeway for more democratization and political development in Taiwan. Although succeeded DPP also could not fulfilled the people's expectations as number of devaluations and irregularities appeared during the party's first reign (2000-2008). KMT regain control of power after a two-tenure of hiatus [8].

### Conclusion

Micro or macro-differences of political agendas as well as manifestos of KMT and DPP matter a lot when it comes to the issue of cross-Strait relations. Perhaps, these manifestos must be taken into account if foreign policy of the Republic of China (preferred by KMT, and currently used officially) is to be formulated. The 2004 demonstration led by pro-KMT against DPP had overheated the tension on cross-Strait relations throughout the first two-term of DPP in office. By the dawn of January, 2016 another turn in favour of DPP, begun and that brought the party to regain the power after the gap of eight years' time. Cross-strait relations of course would be among the issues with priorities to the currently elected government.

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