

Political Observations on Elections for Local Public Offices

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Campaigns for the year-end elections for nine categories of local public office are gradually unfolding. Island-wide, more than 10,000 public office holders are to be elected, including special municipality mayors, city assembly members, county magistrates, county assembly members, township chiefs and so on. Any election, in which public office holders are elected by universal suffrage, has its political significance. In democratic elections for public offices in the central government such as president, vice president and legislators or the aforementioned public offices in local government, citizens regularly exercise their statutory civil rights, scrutinize the performance of political parties and their candidates, and decide which persons will exercise executive and legislative power as representatives of the people.

Democratic government is government by the people that reflects the will of the people. Meanwhile, indirect democracy has gradually substituted direct democracy for practical reasons such as the uneven and wide geographical distribution of the population and the fact that the vast majority of voters are busy with their everyday jobs. When the people elect public office holders, civil rights such as the right to freedom, equality, political participation and the benefits of a democratic society are guaranteed. These safeguards restrain democratically elected public office holders from wrongdoings. At the same time, public office holders need to keep abreast of the will of the people to exercise their statutory powers and need to accept the people's

evaluation in regular elections. In comparison to elections at the central government level, elections for local public offices are probably politically less important. However in political science there is the saying: "All politics is local." No state exists without municipalities. Democratization began with local elections in many countries, including Taiwan.

The coming local elections will see the election of an unprecedented number of public office holders, which will test the political wisdom of voters and directly or indirectly affect political parties and candidates in different ways. The well-organized, big political parties are at an advantage because their candidates for public office at various levels of government can support each other in building election campaign momentum. Yet many candidates for local public office have only loose party affiliation and voters do not necessarily cast their votes entirely based on their party preference. Taiwan has had enough experience with democratic elections to have a mature electorate. While combined elections are somewhat more complex, I am convinced that the mature Taiwanese electorate can rise to the task. The elections this year can be characterized by the following factors: a never-ending string of political and economic problems, a tired electorate consumed with making ends meet, and the normalization of democratic elections. Therefore, the electoral atmosphere remains rather sedate. Aside from the more heated races in a number of special municipalities, cities and counties, the remaining election campaigns

proceed locally without much fanfare. All this is quite normal.

The presidential election in 2016 gives the upcoming local elections a greater political significance. They inevitably become a prelude to the presidential election given that the two ballots are spaced just 13 months apart. The administration of President Ma Ying-jeou has been in power for more than six years. Since Ma's reelection in 2012 for a second four-year term, many of his policies have triggered controversy, including higher oil and electricity prices, a bill for the establishment of free economic pilot zones as well as cross-strait agreements on trade in services and trade in goods. Aging demographics and a younger generation deeply disheartened by an uncertain future and shying away from marriage and starting a family undermine the foundation of society. High unemployment, chronically high house prices that put home ownership out of reach for many, and a widening income gap and growing numbers of new poor have increased the potential for violence and irrational behavior. Moreover, as the industrial structure remains unchanged, we have developed excessive dependency on the Chinese market. The policy on 12-year compulsory education keeps changing, while university and vocational education are flashing a red light. These external factors could influence the local elections to a certain degree. The Ko Wen-je phenomenon, i.e. an independent candidate running neck-and-neck with Kuomintang legacy candidate Sean Lien in Taipei City, is a clear manifestation of such effects. The same goes for Democratic Progressive Party mayoral candidate Lin Chia-lung in Taichung City, who poses a serious threat to incumbent Mayor Jason Hu.

Political mobilization and the temporary political participation of the people increase in every election. Therefore, the specter of political confrontation must be faced squarely. In elections for local public office, the number of candidates is particularly high and their personal qualities and background differ greatly. Through comprehensive planning, relevant government agencies must take precautions against possible unrest. Electoral ills such as fraud must also be eradicated. Given the longstanding confrontation between the blue and green political camps, every political party or candidate needs to avoid inflammatory language or risk becoming a public enemy. The candidates for mayor, county magistrate and other posts in this election have proposed a wide array of political platforms, probably more than voters can manage to comprehend. Nevertheless this is an affirmation of a flourishing democracy.

China, Japan and the United States are surely closely observing Taiwan's year-end nine-in-one elections. I am confident that the Taiwan people will again make history with their wisdom. **BT**

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