

Taiwan Public Opinion and the Future Development of Cross-Strait Ties

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Taiwan Brain Trust (TBT) has been tracking Taiwanese citizens' attitude toward national identity, unification with China versus independence, and sentiment toward China in regular opinion polls for quite some time. In the latest poll released in early November, we added three new questions to our questionnaire: How supportive are people of the Occupy Central protests in Hong Kong, how receptive are they to the China-proposed "one country, two systems" framework, and what is their stance on a possible meeting between President Ma Ying-jeou and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The opinion results highlight the following trends: A historic high ratio of 64.4 percent of respondents describe themselves as "Taiwanese" rather than Chinese. Among people under 40, this ratio stands at an even higher 70 percent. Similarly, a record high of 70.1 percent of respondents believe that Taiwan is a sovereign, independent country. Among people under 40, that ratio is even higher with 73 percent. When asked to choose among Taiwan independence, unification with China or maintaining the status quo, a record high 28.4 percent opt for independence, while 55.4 percent favor the status quo and 6.6 percent choose unification. The younger people are the more likely to support independence. In the age groups under 40 some 33.2 percent to 40 percent favor independence. If forced to choose between unification or independence, a historic low of 14.2 percent support unification.

More respondents than ever - 58.1 percent - believe that China is hostile toward Taiwan. Such sentiment is even stronger among people who are younger than 50 (between 60.4 percent and 73.4 percent). Correspondingly, the share of those who believe China is a friendly neighbor has declined to a historic low of 22.8 percent. At the same time, a record high of 40.2 percent say they are unfavorably disposed toward China with such sentiment spread rather evenly among the different age groups. Among the blue camp, like and dislike for China is almost evenly distributed with 29.8 percent versus 26.9 percent, respectively. A historic low of 13.3 percent of respondents say they like China.

These trends can be attributed to the gradual deepening of national consciousness in the wake of Taiwan's democratization, also known as Taiwanization. Several major events that occurred over the past year also play a role.

The Sunflower student movement that erupted in spring was a reaction to the Ma administration's overhasty promotion of cross-strait ties as well as the lack of transparency and violation of democratic principles in cross-strait negotiations. Taiwan's public is concerned that national sovereignty will erode and that the island will be swallowed by China. This would cost Taiwan its economic and political independence and autonomy.

This summer, the alleged divulgence of secrets by a former Mainland Affairs Council

vice minister only substantiated Taiwan citizens' concerns over the nontransparent cross-strait negotiations. The incident also highlighted the lack of discipline within the Ma administration in its dealings with the Chinese negotiation team.

This fall, the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong highlighted the failure of the "one country, two systems" experiment in the territory. Correspondingly, 63 percent of Taiwanese surveyed support the Occupy Central protests, with support rates climbing far above 70 percent the younger the respondents are. Almost 60 percent of respondents believe that "one country, two systems" has failed in Hong Kong. Among younger adults, that ratio reaches almost 70 percent. Some 72 percent of respondents do not support implementing the "one country, two systems" framework in Taiwan. Younger adults almost unanimously (90.2 percent) reject this approach. While overall 67.4 percent of Taiwanese worry that Taiwan will become a second Hong Kong in the future, such concerns plague nearly 80 percent of young adults.

Now that winter is drawing close, another scandal has broken, this time over Ting Hsin International Group's sale of tainted cooking oil. This food scare exposed the ruling Kuomintang's crony capitalism and showed that some Taiwanese businesses that have made riches in China bring home toxic products. The public is discontent that the Ma government has condoned such conduct.

Such sentiment is reflected in the approval rates for the government and the major political parties. Ma and Premier Jiang Yi-huah have seen their approval rates slip to historic lows (Ma 17.3 percent, Jiang 15.8 percent). At the same time,

the major opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has widened its lead over the KMT with regard to public satisfaction. While the DPP and KMT were less than three percentage points apart at respectively 27.3 percent and 23.6 percent in August, satisfaction with the KMT has meanwhile dropped to 17.2 percent, whereas satisfaction with the DPP has risen to 30.2 percent.

Ahead of the Nov. 29 local elections, support for the major political parties has also seen some changes. In August, 21.9 percent said they would vote for the KMT, while 29.5 percent said they would cast their votes for the DPP. However, in October only 16.8 percent said they would cast their ballots for the KMT compared to 34.3 percent who said they would vote for the DPP. These results and several other opinion polls show that the ratio of those who have declared themselves as supporters of the KMT or the blue camp remains consistently low. This also indicates that the DPP enjoys better prospects for winning the upcoming local elections.

Given that the approval ratings for Ma and his KMT continue to decline, hitting a record low in the current poll, Ma is bound to receive a strong backlash of public protest when pushing his agenda for closer ties with China in the future. For example, more than half of respondents, 57.9 percent, worry that a meeting between Ma and Xi would push cross-strait ties closer toward unification.

After the local elections, Ma might emerge as a lame duck and have to face internal strife in the KMT. Cross-strait ties will stagnate now that plans for a Ma-Xi meeting on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) in Beijing

have come to nothing and Ma has come under fire by Chinese official mouthpieces for declaring his support for the Hong Kong peoples' demand that their chief executive be elected directly through universal suffrage.

On the other hand, Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP will be able to bolster her leading position in the party, which will greatly improve her chances of winning the presidential nomination next year. Nevertheless, it would be premature to conclude that the DPP can count on returning to power in 2016. 

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