

Taiwan's Deepening Democracy Calls for Policy Responses

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It is no secret that Chinese influences on the democratic processes of Taiwan are growing rapidly in depth, scale and frequency. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had been making great efforts in engaging Taiwanese political organizations at the most local level since August 2004 when President Hu Jintao announced that “into the island, into the household, and into the hearts (入島入戶入心)” should be major working-guidance for the united front on Taiwan. Reports claim that the Chinese had set-up elaborated network of counterparts for various Taiwanese villages so that requests of subsidies for cross-strait exchanges or even local events in Taiwan can be expedited. When Honorary Chairman Lien Zhan of Taiwan’s ruling Nationalist Party (KMT) led a delegation to visit China in February 2014, among the delegates, the president of the National Association of Villages of Taiwan was given the pride of place to give a speech at an official function. Such special attention to a local politician indicates China’s commitment to reach into the most basic level of Taiwan politics. An extensive Chinese network of “guanxi” with village chiefs means that China would be able to bypass Taiwanese political parties and in effect create its own grassroots political organizations in Taiwan that can be mobilized in time of election.

Given that the KMT has in effect forged an “offshore ruling coalition” with the CCP, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) cannot afford the luxury of optimism despite having secured its biggest victory since 1997

in the November 2014 Nine-in-One municipal elections. Confronting nearly insurmountable structural challenges, the DPP has no other option but to shoulder up the responsibility and propose substantive policies *vis-à-vis* China and trade, to convince Taiwanese voters and the international community that it is able to manage stable cross-strait relations, at the same time to sustain and renew Taiwan’s economy.

First and foremost is China policy. Analyses have shown increasing numbers of Taiwanese without strong party identifications. It is therefore possible for political parties to expand support bases, or at the least, gather more votes in individual election from independent voters by shaping an advantageous electoral agenda and presenting favorable policy packages. DPP still faces a fundamental dilemma in crafting its China policy: how to NOT become a counterfeit-KMT and yet find a solution to convince independent voters, and Beijing, that all options are open. The DPP must demonstrate its ability to be pragmatic and yet uphold Taiwan’s interests.

Another daunting task for the DPP is to find an equation to respond to the shifting political sentiments in Taiwan so clearly demonstrated by the Sunflower Movement. Three salient elements in this dramatic event are: anxieties concerning the sinicization of Taiwan’s economy, erosion of Taiwan’s procedural democracy, and finally the lack of a sense of social-economic security. Not only did the Sunflower Movement bring into play a high level of political energy unseen in Taiwan

politics in the last decade, but also manifest an entirely new kind of political mobilization.

This new kind of political energy cannot be easily co-opted since social movement by nature challenges the existing political institutions, including party politics and policy regimes. Further, for the DPP, coalescing with such social forces would likely complicate its rapprochement with China since many in the movement are extremely skeptical of the so-called “China factor.” But lacking the kinds of resources and elaborated support of Beijing that the KMT has, it is a must for the DPP to be able to tap into this political energy.

Suspicion about China has emerged as a consensus among the Taiwan society. However, without reliance on China, how should Taiwan secure economic viability and vitality? The most important policy to be addressed substantively for an open economy is Taiwan’s commitment to participate in the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP). While many, including both KMT and DPP, pay lip service, very little, if any, actual efforts are made. Serious problem solving needs to take place before Taiwan can actually participate in the negotiations to enter TPP. Some of these issues, such as barring imports of American pork which represents only 0.06 percent of American trade with Taiwan, are very much “owned” by the DPP. Beside, certain agricultural products would become huge obstacles for the negotiations to make real progress given the current agricultural policies in Taiwan. Experiences of Japan in the on-going negotiation with the U.S. demonstrate that American commitment to an open agricultural market weighs as much as that of geopolitical ones.

This is also a vital issue for the DPP since many DPP counties and cities are heavily agricultural ones. Substantial opening of Taiwan’s agricultural market poses serious political risks for the party. The DPP needs to engineer a feasible direct payment system, already popular in the U.S. and EU, for the agricultural households and begin building consensus and policy capacity during the electoral process so as to obtain political mandate and more votes in urban areas.

Taiwan’s participation in the TPP has serious strategic implications for both Taiwan and the region. It allows for Taiwan to become a member of the largest multilateral free trade agreement at same time balance an economy that has become overly dependent on China. Taiwan’s participation, along with Japan, can also prove to the global community that American initiatives continue to shape all aspects of regional order in East Asia.

Policies that favor globalization are likely to be met with vehement criticism and opposition from the social movement activists. But given the premise that DPP must coalesce with the Sunflower political energy, there needs to be a *quid pro quo* policy package in other policy areas. Policies such as improving employment security, raising basic-wages, allocating public spending on human resources rather than infrastructures, facilitating for greater participation of women in the labor market, and a synchronized tax and social security reform must be coordinated into the electoral agenda. Some policies should be media-polished to serve as symbols that would attract the emerging electorate.

In fact, experiences of the Nordic welfare states show that re-combining labor institutions, welfare services and other public policies can stimulate

innovations, create risk-sharing mechanism, and elevate corporate competitiveness. This results in a highly rewarding globalization strategy. Nordic experiences cannot be easily transplanted into Taiwan but offers hints to create a new political alliance through policies. And the DPP indeed needs new political allies.

Although every electoral strategist in Taiwan would insist that complex policies have little effect in garnering votes, the DPP have no alternatives. After the passion and fever generated in the 2004 presidential election, political mobilization based on national identity, once a magic wand for the DPP, has reached its end. The failed 2012 presidential campaign of “fairness and justice” did not prove policy issues irrelevant for the Taiwanese electorate. The campaign was bogged down by petty and fabricated scandals such as the Yu Chang Biologics case. Policy contents were also poorly coordinated and left little impression on voters. Most of all, it was prior to the Sunflower Movement, before Taiwanese woke up to the deepening social cleavages.

Lacking an attractive core issue had been one of the major factors for DPP’s losing streak in national elections. The DPP needs to translate deepening substantive democracy into an attractive and ultimately winning electoral strategy. One possible prescription is to coordinate an electoral agenda that would piece together active pursuit of an open economy while affecting more policies to create greater social-economic security. It is high time the DPP brought forth to the Taiwan society a new core issue and lead Taiwan into the new phase of democratic politics as it did in the late 1990s. **BT**

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