

Cross-strait Ties Calm After DPP Trumps KMT in 29 Nov. 2014 Elections

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The latest opinion poll by the Taiwan Brain Trust (TBT), conducted on Dec. 18-20, 2014, is the most comprehensive survey published in the wake of the Nov. 29 local elections as it covers Taiwan's domestic political situation as well as cross-strait relations. Several survey results deserve our special attention. First, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) exceeded the ruling Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) for the first time in favorability ratings, which shows a mood change among the electorate in the wake of the election outcome. As a result, both the approval and favorability ratings of DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen has improved, along with her prospects for the 2016 presidential elections. In contrast, the central government's poor performance is credited as the main reason for the KMT's election defeat. At the same time, President Ma Ying-jeou's approval ratings has hit rock bottom, while New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu and former Taipei City Mayor Hau Lung-pin have become the KMT's new bearers of hope. The overwhelming victory of the DPP has not polarized cross-strait relations. This is partly due to the fact that these elections were local ones and partly owing to China's self-restraint and somewhat neutralized stance during the process. These combined factors prevent the polarization of cross-strait relations in the wake of the election.

1. Tsai Ing-wen rises with the tide

Following the local elections, the DPP's favorability ratings soared from 24.5 percent

before the elections to 32.7 percent. The upward trend for the DPP also boosted the electorate's satisfaction with Tsai's performance to 65.5 percent, up from 48.7 percent in August 2014. Satisfaction with Tsai outstrips dissatisfaction across the political spectrum of pan-green and pan-blue voters. Tsai's high approval ratings are reflected in her strong position within the DPP. Asked whom they would pick as presidential candidate for the DPP, 44 percent of the respondents chose Tsai, while Tainan Mayor William Lai came in a distant second with just 20.8 percent. Moreover, support for another potential challenger, former DPP Chairman Su Tseng-chang, has slipped from a high of nearly 20 percent in October 2013 to barely 9 percent. This shows that the election outcome has helped consolidate Tsai's lead within the party and that a Tsai-Lai north-south team up might be an attractive presidential ticket.

2. Lame Duck Ma, Crown Prince Chu, Dark Horse Hau

While 75 percent believe the DPP is likely to regain power in 2016, satisfaction with Ma has hit an all-time low with 14 percent. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the president has reached a record high of 76.2 percent. Even lower is the public's satisfaction with the new cabinet at just 13.5 percent. Clearly, the cabinet reshuffle in the wake of the elections has failed to boost the popularity of the Ma administration. Asked which reasons were behind the KMT's election defeat, more than 80 percent of the respondents pointed to the central government's

poor performance, which has damaged Ma's political prestige and made him a lame duck even before a successor has emerged. In this situation, Eric Chu gained an opportunity to come to the fore. More than 50 percent of respondents would pick Chu as presidential candidate for the KMT, whereas support for all other KMT heavyweights including Vice President Wu Den-yih stood at less than 10 percent. If Chu is excluded from the list of potential candidates, Hau emerges as the frontrunner with a support rate of almost 30 percent, which makes him a surprise contender for the presidency.

3. Beijing neutral, cross-strait ties calm

No major changes are registered with regard to the self-identification of Taiwan's residents and their attitude toward independence versus unification with China: Asked "Do you see yourself as 'Taiwanese,' 'Chinese' or 'both,'" more than 60 percent declared themselves to be Taiwanese. If forced to choose between "Taiwanese" or "Chinese," almost 89 percent identified themselves as Taiwanese. Some 65 percent believe Taiwan's present status is that of a sovereign, independent country, and 67.5 percent believe that Taiwan should become an independent country if the status quo were no longer viable. What deserves our attention is that self-identification has not changed after the DPP's big victory. On the contrary, the ratio of those harboring hostile feelings toward China has declined, a trend that can be attributed to Beijing's neutralized stance during the election.

4. Taiwan faces a "constitutional moment" but consensus yet to emerge

While 66 percent of the respondents support constitutional reform and almost 70 percent support convening a National Affairs Conference

to discuss such reforms, the survey shows a lack of consensus on Taiwan's future political system. Support for and opposition to a cabinet system nearly balance each other out at 34.5 percent and 38.4 percent, respectively. In the future, this lack of consensus will constitute the greatest obstacle to constitutional reform. **BT**

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