

## The Pros and Cons of Presidential vs. Parliamentary System in Taiwan

Li Ming-juinn

Since the introduction of democracy in human history, presidential systems and parliamentary systems have proven to best live up to the principle of separation of powers at the central government level. When deciding whether to adopt a presidential or a parliamentary system countries need to take into account a host of conditions and factors. Federal states, for instance, tend to adopt a presidential system in order to strengthen central government operations. Constitutional monarchies, for their part, tend to adopt parliamentary systems to protect human rights effectively. Counting among the criteria for accepting or rejecting either system are party politics and the qualities of political parties. Each country must therefore ensure that the system it adopts suits the nation's circumstances.

Consequently, Taiwan should adopt a presidential system, as it is not suited to implement a parliamentary system for the following reasons:

First, a parliamentary cabinet system requires a symbolic head of state with no real power. Only thus could presidential interference with day-to-day politics be ruled out. Should Taiwan implement a parliamentary system, it will be difficult to turn the presidency into a figurehead unless the election of the president by universal suffrage is abolished. Even so, the constitution must set strict restriction to prevent the president from interfering with government. A case in point is Japan's Tenno system. The emperor of Japan, also known as Tenno, must have the express

mandate of the cabinet before engaging in any political activity, and his actions would not take legal effect without the cabinet's recognition. This shows that an essential condition for a cabinet system is preventing the ceremonial head of state from influencing the system's operations. Were Taiwan to implement a cabinet system, it must do away with the direct election of the president or else it will be difficult to ensure that the ceremonial head of state is no more than a figurehead.

Second, in a parliamentary cabinet system the premier and the majority of the cabinet ministers and political appointees should come from among the members of parliament. Therefore, the lawmakers' experience, ability, quality and integrity must be fully taken into consideration. It is doubtful that Taiwan's legislators have the required expertise to serve in the executive branch. Another important factor is crucial for the success of a cabinet system: the parliament must check and balance the cabinet formed by the same majority party. Does Taiwan have a legislature and lawmakers that can meet these standards?

Third, a parliamentary cabinet system builds on a pyramid-shaped democratic system formed by the people at the bottom, parliament in the middle and the cabinet on top. The majority party in the legislature forms the cabinet and controls executive power. Therefore, if the majority party faces internal political struggles or factional opposition, the premier could be

forced to step down and the cabinet would have to be reshuffled. In such an instance, the will of the people and the sovereignty of the people are disregarded. Therefore, another essential condition for a parliamentary system is that political parties have enough character to prevent anti-democratic struggles and shoulder up their responsibility to the people. In addition, if the relationship between the sitting legislators and their parties is not sound, the ruling party might lose its parliamentary majority over night due to renegades from its own camp, and a new coalition based on vested interests or spoils-sharing might form the cabinet. In other words, unbeknownst to the electorate, a government change could happen due to political bargain or a minority of lawmakers switching their affiliation. Again, the will of the people and popular mandate would have no input in the process. Whether Taiwan could handle such a situation is highly questionable.

Taiwan has held several presidential elections. The public has grown used to deciding the party in power by such elections. Moreover, Taiwan's political parties differ vastly with regard to their stance on national identity and the constitutional system. It is imperative that consensus gradually emerges through comprehensive public debate and that diametrical confrontation and crises ease in the course of the presidential election process. At the same time, Taiwan's political, economic and social system still needs to undergo massive reform to truly realize democratic politics and a welfare state. Backed by a clear public mandate, executive power in a presidential system can constitute a guiding force for democratic reform because it comes with a fixed term of office and stable government. On top of that, Taiwan faces the China threat and diplomatic isolation. Only

a presidential system can pool forces to divert crises and demonstrate the united will of the Taiwanese people to the international community. These are circumstances unique to Taiwan and the main reasons for the adoption of a presidential system. **BT**

**Li Ming-juinn** is Director of Research Department of the Taiwan Brain Trust.