Chinese democracy

I was in Taipei on election day. It was quieter than some of the earlier elections I have witnessed: less flag-waving, less drama. Perhaps this was because of the steady rain (not unusual in Taipei); perhaps the novelty of democratic elections is wearing off. After all, the first presidential election took place in 1996. In large part, I think it was because the outcome was a racing certainty. Polls had been predicting a big win for Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for several months. The vote seemed to be more about disillusionment with the divided and ineffective Kuomintang (KMT) than a vote for any new political vision, which meant political debate in the run-up to the election was strangely subdued. In the end, 66% of the electorate voted: still respectable, but down from 74% in 2012. Polling booths closed at 4pm, and a couple of hours later, sitting in my favourite reflexology parlour, I was able to watch the results roll in. The KMT was duly given a thrashing; the only parts of the political map now coloured blue are the mountainous east and the offshore islands.

The composition of the Legislative Yuan by party in 2012 and 2016

There are strict limits on political donations in Taiwan: for an individual, this is NT$100,000 (approximately US$3,000) to a single candidate and NT$300,000 to a political party; for a corporation, the limits are NT$1 million and NT$3 million, respectively. This allows Taiwan to avoid the distasteful, plutocratic bun-fight which American politics has become. The lack of “political families” (think Clinton/Bush) was also notable, though the grandson of Chiang Ching-kuo, the man who initiated democracy in Taiwan, did get elected as a legislator. The public subsidy for parties receiving over 3.5% of the popular vote (down from 5% previously) also meant that the election was far from a straight two-party fight. On the front page of the thick election pamphlet posted through my door were photos of the three presidential candidates: Eric Chu for the KMT, Tsai for the DPP and James Sung for his People First Party. (I note that the two male candidates both chose female running mates, while Tsai chose a man.) Inside, however, were the details of 18 parties, each with a space in which to lay out its manifesto.

There is a Taiwan Independence Party. This only has one policy, independence for Taiwan, though it goes to some length to state that name should be “Taiwan” and nothing else (I think the author is thinking of “Republic of China” or “Chinese Taipei”). At the other end of the spectrum is the China Reunification Party. This also has only one policy, the peaceful, negotiated re-unification with China under “one country, two systems”. It does, however, also go on to explain the economic benefits (no longer having to pay for an army and zero-tariff access to the Chinese market). For the record, the Taiwan Independence Party received 27,496 votes, the second lowest among the 18 parties, while the Reunification Party scored 56,347 votes, or almost 0.5% of the vote. Perhaps this will give Beijing some comfort, but not too much: the National Health Service Alliance (free healthcare) garnered 51,024 votes; and my personal favourite, the Tree Party, received an impressive 77,174 votes. The National Health Service Alliance’s vote may have been reduced as a result of its decision to write its manifesto in classical verse.
The Tree Party is not, as the name might suggest, simply for tree-huggers. Its policy platform also includes food safety (a common theme across the parties), avoiding participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (“don’t get caught in the middle of an economic war between the US and China”), the spreading of government functions around the island (why should they all be in Taipei?) and a reduction in the minimum voting age from 20 to 18. Unfortunately, the Tree Party split the green vote with the Green Party, a unique feature of whose platform was the promotion of gay (“LGBTIQ”) rights. The absolute lowest vote (15,442) was achieved by the Constitutional Convention of Taiwan, whose platform includes free dental treatment, free internet access and no tax on motorbikes of 125cc or under. My prize for the strangest agenda, however, goes to the Peace Dove Party, which is really very keen on the protection of bird life.

In contrast to these, the statements of the largest parties are rather dull. The DPP’s ten-policy outline is especially full of apple-pie generalities and buzzwords: promotion of an “Asian Silicon Valley”, “AsiaPac biotech” and “green energy”. There is not a single use of the word “China” in the whole document, and only on the tenth point is the single biggest question in Taiwanese politics alluded to in “safeguard democratic freedoms, promote cross-strait peace and stability, undertake exchanges in a transparent way, strengthen our defences and our foreign relations capability”. Throughout the campaign, Tsai managed to avoid answering the China question, mumbling about the importance of communicating and maintaining the status quo. This status quo, however, is based on the KMT-devised “1992 Consensus”, whereby both sides agree that there is only one China, but agree to differ on what China that is – Republic or People’s Republic.

I am sure she will be asked the question again by Beijing after her accession on 20 May – and I am sure that Beijing will want an answer.

The surprise package of the election was the New Power Party. Despite the rather fascistic name, this party is only a year old and developed from the student “Sunflower” movement, which occupied the Legislative Yuan in a successful protest against passage of the cross-strait agreement for goods and services. Despite its majority, the KMT was subsequently unable to pass this important agreement, which would have allowed Taiwan’s service industries easier access to the Chinese market. Like the DPP, New Power doesn’t mention China by name in its agenda, but its stance towards the mainland is not in doubt. The agenda inveighs against “black box” politics and its most-used phrase is “a good life”.

How the system works in Taiwan is that, besides voting for president and voting for a party, the citizen must also vote for his local legislator. In my district, a part of central Taipei, there was a choice of seven candidates. In addition to the mug shots, the official mail-out carried extensive biographical data on each candidate. This included date of birth (the oldest and youngest candidates, both independents, were 78 and 33, respectively) and also place of birth. I notice that, ironically, the smiling KMT candidate gave his birthplace as just “Kaohsiung City”, while the grim Taiwan Independence lady showed hers as “Miaoli County, Taiwan province”. The winner, now my legislative representative, was the New Power candidate, a heavy-metal singer with a ponytail, known to his friends as Freddy.

There are 113 legislators in Taiwan. The number was halved in 2008 (who says turkeys don’t vote for Christmas?) and seems to me to represent a very reasonable politician-to-citizen ratio for an island of 24 million, especially given the unicameral system. Of the 113 legislators, 68 are directly elected by district, and the other 34 are drawn from the party lists, based upon the popular votes for parties with over 5% of total votes cast. These lucky individuals do not need to campaign for their seats like other politicians; number one on the KMT party list, and thus sure of a seat, was Wang Jin-pyng, President Ma’s bête noir and the house speaker. Freddy is one of the New Power Party’s five legislators, which makes it the third-largest party after the DPP and KMT. Given the scale of the KMT defeat, it is perhaps not surprising that 40% of legislators will be new to the job. Also, the proportion of women legislators rises from 33% to 38%. There are six seats reserved for aboriginals, three from the mountains and three from the plains; the aboriginal vote is one of the few which the KMT won. The number-one draft on the New Power Party list is named Kawlo Iyun Pacidal.
Taiwan is now faced with an interregnum until 20 May, when Ms Tsai takes office. The new president will then select her prime minister and cabinet. Unfortunately, the old cabinet, unwilling to drag on as unloved caretakers until the new president is ready, has resigned en masse. So, as I write, Taiwan really has no government. For all its faults, however, Taiwan is the only Chinese country which has a fully functioning democratic system; not Singapore, not Hong Kong (despite the best efforts of the Yellow Umbrellas) and certainly not the People’s Republic, where the only people trusted with a democratic choice are farmers selecting a village head. In the run-up to the election, one incident that attracted a lot of local media coverage was a 16-year-old Taiwanese singer and member of K-pop band Twice being forced to give an abject apology for waving a Taiwanese flag in a music video. The flag she was waving, quite modestly, was that of the Republic of China, not the green Taiwan independence flag. It seems as though Beijing too needs to brush up on the 1992 consensus.

Chris Ruffle, 27 January 2016

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