Critical Issues Confronting China:

Taiwan’s Tumultuous “Normal Election”

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After Taiwan’s mid-term election in November 2018, President Tsai Ing-wen’s approval rating fell as low as 20 percent. Many southern parts of Taiwan which were presumed to be green, the color of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), turned out to be blue, the color of the Kuomintang (KMT), resulting in mostly blue from North to South in favor of the KMT. Furthermore, several proposals on the ballot close to the DPP’s heart, including marriage equality and anti-nuclear energy policy, were unambiguously rejected by the voters.

Stunningly, Tsai is now in a solid lead ahead of her KMT opponent, Han Kuo-yu, in opinion polls, 45 versus 22 percent. Her prospect for reelection on January 11, 2020 looks promising again. What happened in the past year that could explain this dramatic turn around? Shelley Rigger, the Brown Professor of East Asian Politics at Davidson College, North Carolina, delineated the vicissitudes of Taiwan’s political landscape and explained both Taiwan’s inter-party politics and the KMT’s intra-party politics.

As of October 2018, the DPP enjoyed a legislative majority and held many local leadership positions from the 2016 election. However, the November mid-term election reversed this favorable situation for the DPP. At the same time, Han Kuo-yu, a KMT party member who had been out of politics from 2002 to 2018, surprisingly won the mayoral seat of Kaohsiung, Taiwan’s second largest city, and became a rising star of the KMT. His down-to-earth commoner’s style and charisma aroused a widespread “Han wave.” However, today Han’s position is so dire that some even wonder whether the KMT might want to change candidates ahead of the January election.

Rigger attributed this reversal of momentum to an external factor, since Taiwan’s domestic situation did not alter much. This consequential trigger was President Xi Jinping’s new year speech in Beijing, which was perceived by Taiwan as a threat to its sovereignty. Tsai’s speech on the next day, in response to Xi, struck a tone of courage and resolve that won her the people’s appreciation. In addition, Rigger sensed that Hong Kong’s massive protest since June, closely watched in Taiwan, and its current quagmire illustrate the weaknesses and limits of the “one country two systems” framework, even though Hong Kong’s status vis-à-vis the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is qualitatively different from Taiwan’s. This juxtaposition makes Tsai look even more suitable to be at the helm of Taiwan at this juncture.
Rigger suspected Han’s declining popularity and this turning of the tide to be “the beginning of an end of the KMT.” She then traced the KMT’s history and its intra-party politics. Between 1945, when the KMT took Taiwan from Japan at the end of World War II, and 1949, when the KMT retreated into Taiwan after losing the mainland to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a couple of millions of mainlanders migrated into Taiwan, whom Rigger called “1949ers”. These were mostly the Chinese social elites of the 1940s, which formed the core of the KMT. These elites wished to return to the mainland and drive out the CCP. From 1945 to the early 1980s, the KMT’s authoritarian rule over Taiwan was essentially unchallenged. During the democratization period from approximately the mid-1980s to 1996, the DPP emerged as a grassroot party, calling for fair representation of all the people and positioning itself antagonistically to the KMT. It also promulgated Taiwan to take its rightful place, from which Taiwan’s independence evolved into an issue.

From 1947 to the 1980s, the KMT held local elections, in which KMT members enjoyed support not only from the 1949ers but also from soldiers, civil servants, and teachers (军公教) in general. Former Premier Lien Chan and former President Ma Ying-jeou exemplified the leaders who emerged from this group. Being highly educated, polished, with an international focus, these individuals embodied the qualities of the social elite. As a result, they held key political posts, for example, Mayor of Taipei. Another strand of the KMT came from indigenous people, of which Wang Jin-pyung, former President of the Legislative Yuan, is a representative. They supported the KMT because the KMT delivered tangible goods and services to local communities and had financial resources and party patronage throughout the government apparatus. Having won Wang Jin-pyung’s support and being a 1949er himself, Han Kuo-yu united these two factions of the KMT in 2018.

Although Han’s straight-forward, feisty, and undisciplined charming style won him many diehard fans, he is perceived as having over-reached since he has few party credentials and began his presidential campaign soon after he was elected as Mayor of Kaohsiung, eclipsing many party elders with more seniority. He is also viewed as not presidential enough in his demeanor, not serious enough in his attitude and not strong enough to stand up to Beijing. In addition, the DPP passed legislation in 2018 which squeezed out KMT’s ability to use non-appropriated funds for political purposes, reducing the KMT’s attraction to ordinary people.

The DPP is lukewarm about Tsai’s reelection, for several of her liberal initiatives are not popular among the people, but the party is at least united behind her. On cross-strait relations, she has moved to the center, away from the extreme view of pushing for independence and used the term “Republic of China Taiwan” (中华民国台湾) in her formal speeches. In comparison, the KMT seems split about its candidate, even though some elite advisors are close to Han Kuo-yu and are campaigning for him. In conclusion, Rigger pointed to the “unbelievable generational divide” between the KMT and the DPP, as older diehard KMT supporters die off and more young people are attracted to the ideals of the DPP. If the DPP wins in January next year, Rigger anticipated a more heightened uncertainty for the future.