

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Existential Threats and Democracy: 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election

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Taiwan is a divided society in which two groups of people with different national identities live on the same island. One group wants to establish a Taiwan-centric country. Under the current international power structure, this group is willing to accept the banner of the Republic of China (ROC). The other group wants to maintain the ROC and its cultural and historical connotations. Their interpretation of Taiwanese and Modern Chinese history and culture is different. Because of such difference in identity between the two groups, presidential election in Taiwan is not only about choosing a president but also about choosing a country, whether it is Taiwan or China. After each party turnover, the new ruling party seeks to re-interpret history and culture. Because of the clash between national identities, presidential election is emotionally tense. Parties often accuse the other side of treason, for selling Taiwan, or for even eliminating ROC. However, the main political parties are similar in their socio-economic policies. They heavily rely on writing checks for public construction and social welfare with limited interest in economic structural reforms.

### *Existential Threats*

Existential threat is the main theme of Taiwan's 2020 elections. Although popular support for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) plummeted following its landslide defeat in the late 2018 mayoral election, there has been a quick turn of events. In a speech in early 2019, Xi Jinping argued that unification is the ultimate goal for China with the “one country, two systems” as its backbone and the use of force as an option. This led to an elevated sense of existential threat among the Taiwanese and President Tsai Ing-wen swiftly and firmly fought back against the statement, which helped raise her approval rating. Xi’s speech and President Tsai’s following actions caused the Kuomintang (KMT)’s less confrontational mainland policy to lose its appeal. A massive democratic protest also took place in Hong Kong in mid-2019 to accompany these events. Many Taiwanese are worried that China’s encroachment will destroy Taiwan’s sovereignty and democracy. DPP has hence been using the perception of the Chinese threat, Taiwan’s rights to deny China’s demands and the protection of Taiwan’s freedom and democracy as the main messages of its election campaign. DPP’s political messages have helped to boost their votes, especially among the young voters and educated urban dwellers.

Another existential threat comes from concerns among the pan-blue supporters regarding the survival of the ROC. For these supporters, threat does not emanate from the other side of the Strait, but from DPP's ways of promoting nation-building and localization. In the past few years, DPP has pushed through curriculum reform, transitional justice, and the Taiwanization of cultural policies. The pan-blue supporters worry that these policies will leave the ROC an empty shell, with only the country's name and the national flag remaining unchanged. In general, DPP's appeals of sovereignty, autonomy and the protection of freedom and democratic institutions are universal values that are likely to be accepted by pan-green, independent, and even light-blue voters. In contrast, KMT's appeals of guarding the ROC is an identity issue and restricted to the pan-blue camp, and especially the deep blue masses. DPP's appeal to the wider Taiwanese public compared to the pan-blue supporters is one of the primary reasons for its victory.

Finally, the Tsai Ing-wen administration's other policies have helped raise her popularity among the younger public. For instance, the Tsai Ing-wen government passed the same-sex marriage bill in 2019 and has steadily raised the minimum wage throughout the past few years. Her government also faces favorable conditions for reelection as the international economic environment remains strong and Taiwan's exports and the stock market both continue to perform well. On the other hand, KMT nominate Han Kuo-Yu, the incumbent Kaohsiung Mayor, ran for president less than a year after he got elected. Many people questioned the legitimacy of his participation. He has attempted to appeal to lower classes by arguing that that cross-strait reconciliation can bring economic opportunities. In terms of other socio-economic policies, both Tsai Ing-wen and Han Kuo-Yu are largely similar.

### ***Balance between External Threats and Political Freedom***

Taiwan has been facing China's military threat constantly since World War II. Taiwan government imposed significant restrictions on political and social freedoms to maintain Taiwan's security. Yet it becomes problematic when the government overly restricts these freedoms in order to strengthen its rule under the banner of national security. In response to China the Tsai Ing-wen government is driven to place its own restrictions on political and social freedoms through policies such as the anti-infiltration law and crackdown on fake news. The anti-infiltration law regulates cross-strait interactions extensively by placing punitive measures against the accepting or entrusting of Chinese instructions and funding to lobby and influence elections. In doing so, it aims to limit China's political, economic, and cultural influence upon Taiwan. However, the bill was discussed in the Legislative Yuan for a very short period of time and was passed hastily, mainly to prevent DPP from losing votes to the more radical small green-camp parties. As a result, the Anti-Infiltration Act has caused uneasy among the pan-blue supporters and Taiwanese who live in and travel to China often. Because China's state power penetrated its society and economy, doing business and academic exchanges in the Mainland, etc., are unavoidable to deal directly or indirectly with the Chinese government, and thereby under the risk of violating the law. Under such a structure, to enact such a law, there should be more discussions with different sectors of the society.

After the DPP lost the 2018 county mayoral election, it attributed its election failure partly to the proliferation of fake news, especially those from China. Since the election, the DPP government has actively cracked down misinformation on the internet with state agencies working to block cyber army from China as well as interrogating and punishing individuals who produce and disseminate fake news. While these measures have had a positive effect of curbing the spread of fake news, they also risk violating freedom of speech. In fact, some of the individuals who are accused for spreading fake news include supporters of the opposition party who comprise the general public and serve as opinion leaders. In fact, both blue and green have their own cyber army and they all engage in news manipulation on the Internet.

### ***Two Major Parties with Mixed Moderate and Tough Positions***

Taiwan's independent voting population, which is actually quite large, is fatigued of continued fights between pan-blue and pan-green coalitions over national identity and policies regarding unification and independence. Most voters prefer to maintain the status quo and take a more inclusive position in the national identification issue. While pan-blue and pan-green supporters vote for candidates of their respective coalition, the moderate voters tend to support the candidate with a better economic vision, personal image, and a more inclusive stance on the national identity and cross-strait issues. Candidates who take on a moderate policy stance also sometimes draw broad support from light-green or light-blue voters who belong to the opposite camp.

As a result, candidates from both parties often have to propose more moderate and inclusive policies in order to win presidency. An example is how Tsai softened her identity policy and slowed down transitional justice policies following the defeat of the county mayoral election in 2018. In the 2020 election, she even proposed the concept of “Republic of China: Taiwan,” which—like Ma Ying-jeou’s 2012 statement, “ROC is our country and Taiwan is our home”—attempts to fuse the Chinese and Taiwanese identities together. Unlike her KMT rival who solely safeguarded ROC beliefs and identity, Tsai contributed to DPP victory by promoting a more widely inclusive campaign slogan.

On the other hand, the two Taiwanese political parties face the same dilemma: they wish to appeal to moderate voters while also catering to hardline voters in their own camps. This is a problem for the parties as shifting towards the center may induce the hardline voters not to vote or vote for other smaller parties that are more radical on the identity spectrum. On the other hand, the DPP worries that it will lose the support of independent voters if it takes a hardline on cross-strait relations while the KMT is concerned that it will lose their support for being overly friendly towards Beijing. As a result of such dilemma, political parties choose to be moderate on some issues while being tough on the others. For example, the DPP emphasizes that it will leave the name of the ROC unchanged, will not push through constitutional amendment and Taiwanese independence. At the same time, it rushes to pass the Anti-Infiltration Act and in some instances, accuse the KMT of kowtowing to Beijing. KMT demonstrates similar characteristics as the DPP. On the one hand, it stands against the “one country, two systems” proposal and upholds freedom and democracy, insisting that reunification requires the consent of the Taiwanese. But on the other hand, it emphasizes safeguarding the ROC to gain the support of the deep-blue voters.

As portrayed above, DPP is more willing to compromise on the identity and country name issue but is less willing to back down from tight regulation of the cross-strait interaction. By contrast, KMT's mixed picture reveals their deep distrust in DPP's promise of keeping the ROC regime.

### ***Impacts on the Function of Democracy***

Tsai Ing-wen won 57% of the votes in the 2020 presidential election. This result sent a strong message that the more China intimidates Taiwan, the further Taiwan is going to draw away from China. Votes show that the Taiwanese public support political parties that clearly say no to China and its "one country, two systems" proposal. With a stable and vibrant liberal democracy, Taiwan is naturally inclined to become united in support of its current political system against threats from China's hegemonic authoritarianism. Even in the future, threats and economic incentives from Beijing will not be enough to undermine the determination of Taiwanese to protect Taiwan from falling to the Chinese Communist Party. Unless China undergoes political liberalization and reform, Taiwanese are unlikely to change their minds.

But this election also raises some potential concerns about democracy. First of all, accepting the result of democratic competition is an important foundation of democracy. Taiwan has experienced seven presidential elections, and three party turnovers. Taiwan's democracy has well passed Samuel Huntington's two-turnover test of democratic consolidation. However, some candidates fail to observe the rules of game in primary. While this situation tends to occur mainly at local primary elections, it has been occurring in this election. During the DPP primary, Tsai Ing-wen postponed the primary and changed the rules of the elections several times after she fell behind in polls following a challenge from her former premier. She was then finally able to reclaim her victory following Xi Jinping's speech which provoked the Taiwanese citizens to rally behind her. Meanwhile, Terry Kuo, the chair of Foxconn, who participated in the primary as the KMT candidate, also refused to endorse the winner of the election after placing second.

In addition, the independence of some non-partisan government agencies also began to erode beginning in 2019, the year prior to the 2020 election. For example, while the National Election Commission was chaired by non-partisan members in the past, DPP is now able to nominate its own members as the chair. The police force and the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau have also been responsible for cracking down on fake news, but as aforementioned, some of the fake news allegations are based on partisan issues and are politically instrumentalized. In addition, a high-profiled member of the Control Yuan member intervened to interview judges when he was unhappy with the court decisions. Finally, DPP has restricted the exercise of direct democracy in restricting the influence of referendum on the presidential election by allowing referendums to be held biannually and not alongside presidential elections.

As a liberal democracy, civil liberties in Taiwan have always been fairly protected, and the participation of civic society groups is also quite active. But as mentioned above, because of security reasons, the government has begun to place increased restrictions on political freedom. Taiwan' democracy is certainly unlikely to retreat into electoral democracy, but still requires attention. The reason why Taiwan has been able to compete with China

is due to its continued upholding of the banner of freedom and democracy in the moral front. A setback in freedom and democracy will also damage Taiwan's security. As key to a stable democracy is determined by the attitudes and strength of the civil society, Taiwan's civil society groups, which are strong and active, will refuse to accept further restriction on political freedom. Polls over the years have shown that more than 90% of Taiwanese do not support China's "One country, two systems" proposal, and prefer a free and democratic system. This means that the money incentives and the political and military threat that China provide and exert over the years have failed to buy the hearts of Taiwanese. Can misinformation effectively sway the minds of the Taiwanese? If not, what is the point of putting so much effort to restrict people's freedom?

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