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Article 9

Taiwan's democratic movement and push for independence

Taiwanese nationalism can be traced back to resistance against Japanese colonialism in the early 1920s. Upon Japan's defeat in 1945, Taiwan was returned to the 'motherland', the Republic of China. Taiwanese rebelled in 1947; the Guomindang's suppression of the uprising—the February 28 Incident—aliented the population and helped create the contemporary Taiwanese independence movement.

By Chang Mau-kuej

As is well known, there were two Chinas after 1949; following the Communist victory on the mainland, the island of Taiwan became the last holdout of Jiang Zieshi's Guomindang (GMD) regime. Until the mid 1980s, the GMD rules Taiwan with an iron fist; in the name of countering communist insurgency, the regime was inclined to punish all signs of political assertion from below. During this period, the independence movement was forced underground or into exile; it had little or no impact on cross-Straits relations or on Taiwan's domestic politics, though resentment against the ROC—the 'Chinese outsider regime'—remained.

Increased prosperity in the 1970s created a social base desiring political change. Opposition to the GMD grew, especially after 1978 when the US and the PRC established diplomatic ties. Diplomatically isolated and its legitimacy challenged, the GMD had to loosen its grip to include more Taiwanese in politics. This set the background for the political struggle during the process of democratisation between 1986 and 1995.

Indigenising Taiwanese politics

The opposition to the GMD regime called for democracy, social reform, and the assertion of Taiwanese identity and pride. The call to determine Taiwan's own future grew as control over the levers of political power and cultural domination shifted from Mainland Chinese to Taiwanese. Political indigenisation was prompted first and foremost by the GMD's desire to retain dominance; without its transformation, the GMD would likely have lost power much earlier. Institutionally, indigenisation included phasing out the National Assembly, which in theory still represented all of China, and revisions to the constitution to accommodate democratic politics and direct presidential elections.

From 1986 onwards, the GMD had to compete with the newly formed Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In addition, the GMD had to face Taiwanese self-assertion from within the party—led by its own chairman Li Denghui. Li came to power in 1988, succeeding the last strongman of the ROC, Jiang Jingguo. Li's twelve-year rule—termed the 'silent revolution'—featured indigenisation as its basic philosophy in international relations and domestic politics, in trade and culture, the military and education.

Unsurprisingly, the programme provoked backlash. The power struggle within the GMD, the expulsion and marginalisation of mainlander elites from important positions, and the replacement of Chinese nationalism with Taiwanese consciousness resulted in the break-up of the GMD, first with the emergence of the New Party in 1993, and again in 2000 with the emergence of the people First Party. Feuds within the GMD benefited the DPP, allowing it to win key elections. The DPP not only sided with the GMD-promoted indigenisation campaign, but allied with Li in his intra-party fight, helping to split the GMD. Li led the GMD and the country until he was expelled in 2000 for 'destroying the party and selling the country'.

The 'silent revolution' encouraged citizens to cultivate their love and loyalty to Taiwan. Though the name and constitution of the ROC remain, people can now justifiably think of the ROC as equivalent to 'Taiwan', a source for new loyalty and pride.

The current dilemma

Beijing's influence on Taiwanese domestic politics has grown since the mid 1990s. This can be attributed to China's new economic weight, and the need felt by Taiwanese businesses to 'go west' across the Straits to compete successfully in the global economy. In 2003, China, including Hong Kong, accounted for about one

fourth of Taiwan's trade surplus, and about one-half of Taiwan's foreign investment. To further complicate matters, an estimated one million Taiwanese live, study, do business or travel in China every day; others have chosen to live on the mainland more permanently. The number of cross-Straits marriages has also risen. As a result, China can now play Taiwan's domestic political game by manipulating Taiwan's vested and perceived interests. This has made Taiwanese party politics a nastier game, with both sides mobilizing appeals to national identity.

Li Denghui's visit to the US in June 1995, followed by his 'two countries', triggered the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis which saw large-scale military exercises in southern china, and the shooting of ballistic missiles into Taiwanese waters. This was followed by Hong Kong's uncontested return to the mainland in 1997, which Taiwanese viewed with alarm. For the PRC, Taiwan remains the last lost territory, the final would caused by a century and a half of national humiliation. Many suspect that, if provoked, Beijing will use force to unify China; no one in power in Beijing can afford to appear soft on Taiwan.

Despite Beijing's repeated warnings, Taiwan held its first-ever referendum on March 20, 2004. Coinciding with presidential elections, the referendum was to call on China to remove its 500 mid-range missiles aimed at Taiwan. The proposed referendum invited citizens to vote on Beijing's stand—the legitimacy of its option to use force to unify China. The referendum drew criticism from the US, where President Bush accused Taiwan's President Chen Shuibian of wanting to 'change the status quo unilaterally'.

Mounting pressure finally forced Chen to compromise. He replaced the original referendum question with two awkwardly worded queries that addressed funding for national defence, and the creation of a special department to promote peaceful relations with the PRC. The referendum failed to pass the threshold required by law (an absolute majority of eligible voters had to vote in favour). Only 45% of eligible voters participated, though 90% of them voted in favour of the two proposals. The referendum, however, demonstrated strong Taiwanese assertion in the face of pressure from both Beijing and Washington.

As the campaign ended, Chen regained the presidency by a margin of 0.2%. Protests questioning the legitimacy of Chen's victory plunged Taipei into chaos for weeks. Taiwan's voters are now divided into two camps. The first, Pan Green Camp, led by the current DPP government, sees the PRC as an immanent threat. While they may desire better relations with China, their main concern is Taiwan's hard-earned democracy, prosperity and pride. The DPP, under the pretext of improving government efficiency, wants to revise or draft a new Taiwanese constitution. As openly pushing for independence remains risky, the Pan Green Camp has chosen a defensive approach to the sovereignty issue: resistance to unification, and, as a last resort, insistence on the right to declare independence should Beijing invade.

The Pan Blue Camp is led by the GMD and other opposition parties. Viewing China as the land of economic opportunity, they want Taiwan to make use of its relative advantages before it is too late. They do not 'wish' for better relations with China; they demand the government improves relations immediately. Criticizing Taiwanese independence as parochial and risky, they present themselves as the true sons of the ROC.

Taiwan's domestic politics—the processes of indigenization, democratization and electoral competition—are driving the country's zigzagged route towards self-assertion. So far, the Taiwanese have been unable to establish a clear and sustainable consensus over their own future. The island is pulled by forces from different directions, and is plagued by internal divisions. The overall trend, however, is in favour of greater sovereignty. The dust is far from settled, and the trouble is likely to continue.

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