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Fundamental Change in Taiwan Politics

Arthur S. Ding

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Taiwan's opposition party KMT's landslide victory on the March 22 presidential election is likely to bring a fundamental change to Taiwan politics and consolidate stability and peace in the Taiwan Strait.

TAIWAN'S opposition party, Kuomintang (KMT), won a landslide victory over the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the March 22 presidential election. The KMT's presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou won 58.45% of the total votes, or 7.65 million votes, over the DPP candidate Frank Hsieh's 41.55%, or 5.44 million votes, with a margin of 2.21 million votes.

The two referendum proposals failed to be carried. The first was the DPP's referendum proposal for Taiwan to join the United Nations under the name of Taiwan. The second was KMT's referendum proposal to return to the UN under the name of Republic of China. Both obtained 35.82% and 35.74% votes respectively -- far short of the required threshold of 50% of eligible votes.

Along with the January 12 parliamentary election outcome in which KMT won 81 seats out of total 113 parliamentary seats, a fundamental change in Taiwan politics is now in place.

Political Significance

The foremost significance is the end of politics that is oriented towards political identification. Replacing it is public policy debate, while performance will become the yardstick, and political turnover will become normal in Taiwan politics.

The second is ethnic reconciliation. Ma Ying-jeou's victory vividly reflected this trend, because Ma was born in Hong Kong, came from a mainlander family, and could be elected as president by majority vote. Associated with ethnic reconciliation is the mending of the social cleavage. Taiwan has been divided in the past decade into two camps -- those for independence (who prefer to call themselves Taiwanese) and those for unification with China (who prefer to be called Chinese). This cleavage will now be healed and Taiwan will be united.

Division between the administration and parliament will also end. Despite the fact that DPP won the presidency twice since 2000, it has never won the majority in parliament, and this division has become the DPP's excuse for poor performance. As KMT controls both branches, the government is united, and KMT has to take full responsibility.

DPP's influence will accordingly diminish, at least, in the next few years. After the two defeats, there is a need for the DPP to restructure the leadership and find a new agenda which is appealing enough to the people. It will take time to accomplish the two missions.

Regional Implication

The presidential victory by KMT will enhance stability and peace in the Taiwan Strait. On the one hand, president-elect Ma Ying-jeou promised a "Three No's" policy: no re-unification, no independence (by Taiwan) and no use of force (by China). On the other hand, he publicly endorsed the "1992 Consensus" This is interpreted as both sides of the Taiwan Strait agreeing that there is only one China, but each side having different interpretations over what constitutes this One China.

Significantly, on the other side of the strait, China's Taiwan policy has evolved. The priority has shifted from seeking re-unification to prevent Taiwan from pursuing *de jure* independence. If Taiwan does not pursue *de jure* independence, the urgency will be reduced in China to address the Taiwan issue in the near future.

At the same time, China has appreciated the complexity of Taiwan politics after two decades of interaction. Instead of taking hawkish behaviour as during the 1995/96 Taiwan Strait crisis, China has changed its tactics towards Taiwan by sending the olive branch.

Dialogue at the semi-official level can be expected to resume. Ma's endorsement of the 1992 consensus has met China's condition raised in recent years, and can serve as a common ground between Taiwan and China to pave the way for both sides to initiate the semi-official dialogue. This was unilaterally cut off by China in 1999 when Taiwan's former president Lee Teng-hui argued that Taiwan-China ties were of special state-to-state relations.

Challenge Ahead

There are challenges for Ma down the road. The biggest is how to organize a good team that can deliver what the people expect in the short term so that rising expectations will not lead to frustration.

China's response will be the second challenge. The ball is now in China's court as Ma has publicly endorsed the 1992 consensus; China's response to Taiwan has to be generous enough without creating a domestic backlash. At the same time, there is a new question of how the recent Tibet violence will affect China's calculation toward Taiwan. The Tibet effect will remain an uncertain factor in the wake of Ma's publicly remark that he will not rule out the possibility of boycotting the Olympic Games if the situation in Tibet worsens.

Arthur S. Ding is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He was previously a research fellow at the Institute of International Relations in Taipei, Taiwan. His research focuses on Taiwan-China relations and China's security-related issues, including civil-military relations, military strategy, defence economy, arms control and non-proliferation.