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CSD Background Study: Slow and Steady: Local Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Reform, 1946 – 1977

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2006

Slow and Steady: Local Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Reform 1946 to 1977

An understanding of elections, and in turn, of the democratic processes as a whole must rest partially on broad differentiations of the complexes of behavior that we call elections.

-V.O. Key. "A Theory of Critical Elections"

Democratic transition in Taiwan has been an election-driven process.¹

- Hung-mao Tien & Tun-jen Cheng. "Crafting Democratic Institutions"

the establishment and gradual expansion of Taiwan's local elections system goes hand-in-hand with its transition from what was essentially an authoritarian territory to what is largely considered a democratic success story today. Democratic reformers in Taiwan were able to use local elections to their advantage. Independent opposition candidates became familiar with the democratic process through elections for local government offices, and as the democratic movement grew stronger in Taiwan, opposition candidates were able to use their power to push for expanded access to government, the creation of a national opposition party, and ultimately - yes - through elec-

Introduction

Democracy is one of the most contested concepts in political science, and often has normative connotations. As such, any assessment of a transition to democracy will necessarily leave room for debate regarding the democratic status achieved by a particular country. Robert Dahl contends that there is a functional or procedural definition of democracy which consists of certain institutions and processes that must exist at some minimum level for a country to be considered democratic.³ Therefore, we can assess the degree to which a nation is procedurally democratic and detach that from the concept of democracy in the normative sense.

One of Dahl's indicators of a democracy is the existence of free and fair elections. As this case study will discuss,

to legitimate its governing status and consolidate its political support, both domestically and internationally. The KMT largely determined winning conditions by maintaining a significant degree of control over the electoral process. However, through top-down measures controlled by the KMT, democratic institutions and electoral measures were expanded over time. Nobody could have predicted where these controlled votes at the local level could lead, or how fast the changes would be, once the political system in Taiwan had begun to creak open.

This gradual democratic expansion resulted in increased accountability of the ruling KMT as well as the expansion of meaningful voter representation. Contemporary supporters of both the DPP and the KMT have suggested that there was a certain momentum to the election of opposition candidates; it was only when a greater number of non-KMT candidates were elected that the electorate truly began to believe that these politicians, who were outside the state party, could have the capacity to effect change. This gradual and emerging belief led to increased support for opposition candidates, further emboldening those in opposition to push for democratic change. A watershed election in 1977 propelled the opposition movement into serious political contenders, and with the gradual opening of the electoral system over time, the electoral reform process culminated in free and fair elections for the presidency in 1996, with a transfer of power from the KMT to the opposition (DPP) occurring in 2000.

Although local elections were dominated by the authoritarian KMT for decades, the opposition movement grew largely because of the access to government that local elections allowed independent candidates. In turn, the independent opposition (non-KMT) candidates used their positions within local governing bodies to voice dissent and push for greater access to higher government positions. And when elections for positions in the National Assembly and ultimately for the presidency were opened up,

democratic reformers were able to take advantage of the experience they had gained in running for office at the local level and, in many instances, to run strong and successful campaigns. Local elections were an essential precondition for democratic reform in Taiwan, as they encouraged meaningful and legitimate avenues for political dissent in Taiwan. Thus, as conditions for democratic reform (such as economic and social liberalization) became more widespread, and contestable elected positions were expanded after 1977, opposition candidates were able to use their experience in local government to run successful and co-ordinated campaigns based on national policy issues, and advocate for further democratic reform. Moreover, local elections created a voting culture in Taiwan with an electorate that maintained a respect for the democratic process.

Colonial Influence: Japan and the Establishment of Limited Local Elections in Taiwan

To understand development, you have to understand tradition.⁸ A significant component of Taiwan's history - or tradition - is of foreign rule and a lack of political freedom, both of which have been a major force in shaping Taiwanese development. Between 1895 and 1945, it was Japan that maintained Taiwan as a colony and, like their predecessors, helped to shape Taiwanese society. Although one might not expect colonization to play a role in democratization, during the period of Japanese colonial occupation in Taiwan, limited local elections took place and also provided many Taiwanese with the experience of voting. According to analysis by Shelley Rigger, the Taiwanese democratic reform movement has its beginnings in the first significant movements for greater local autonomy, beginning in 1918 as a quiet resistance to Japanese control of Taiwan.

Various student and youth groups were inspired by the messages of Woodrow Wilson, calling for national self-determination and greater accountability for human rights standards. By 1921, the Taiwan Culture Society was created, which advocated for a Taiwanese Parliament to be used as a check on the authority of the Japanese colonial administration. The Taiwan Culture Society was successful in collecting approximately 17,000 signatures advocating for the creation of a Taiwanese Parliament between 1921 and 1934. By 1927, the Taiwan Culture Society had fragmented into several smaller groups; however, calls for home rule persisted on a smaller scale.⁹ Ultimately, the Japanese administration established local elections by 1935, which were the first instances of political participation through elections for Taiwanese citizens.

Rigger argues that the Japanese colonial administration developed local elections as a means to divert reform movements from advocating for a separate Parliament to work within the existing administration, thus "reward[ing] elites who took a local rather than island-wide perspective, and" diminished incentives to join a united opposition.¹⁰ And although voting was severely restricted and many local positions remained appointed by the central administration, "regular, peaceful political participation" occurred, and by 1939, over 300,000 Taiwanese were registered voters!¹¹ The elected local officials held very little power in comparison to the colonial administration and the franchise was limited to men with certain wealth and age restrictions. The offices of local officials were constrained and they dealt mainly with practical matters such

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undertake measures to weed out state corruption, create mass education programs, and allow certain religious freedoms as well as tolerate academic debates about politics.²⁶

The KMT chose to tie local elections into the ethos of constitutionalism, thus creating an electoral culture grounded in the principles of constitutional governance at some minimum level.²⁷ When the KMT instituted local elections, the party exploited Taiwanese desire for home rule. Rumours began to spread that elections at the executive level would eventually be opened up. However, the KMT was able to dodge the issue with the imposition of martial law in 1949 following the Maoist uprising on the Mainland.²⁸ There would be a constant tension in Taiwanese politics between democracy and dictatorship for years to come.

29

martial law), fuller elections took place with balloting and direct elections occurring for these positions with voting rights granted universally to Taiwan's electorate. Ultimately, by manipulating the home rule movement, at the political level, the KMT sought to infiltrate Taiwan's society and to expand its party network.

However, the elections at their outset and for several decades to come were hardly free and fair. So, by Dahl's measurement, Taiwan's early electoral system could not be classified as democratic. Contemporary academics have mused that corruption and bribery were commonplace.³³ Evidence from critics at the time also found a number of voting irregularities and voter intimidation at the polls, as well as the engineering of electoral outcomes to suit the KMT agenda. For example, Denny Roy points to an example of

Local Elections under the KMT: 1946-1971

The first limited local elections under the KMT took place in 1946 with elections to the Provincial Consultative Assembly, in which approximately 1000 candidates contested 30 seats. Since at this time the ROC controlled the whole of China and Taiwan was a province within the ROC, the Provincial Consultative Assembly served as a means for Taiwan's representation on the Mainland. The consultative assembly had no formal legislative authority, but it became a forum for voicing dissent towards the provincial administration.³⁰

As noted above, the home rule movement had a relatively strong history in Taiwan and had significant importance to the Taiwanese public. Beginning in 1946, the KMT sought to tie into this movement and allow elections to take place at the local level, that is, for positions at the county, municipality (excluding mayoral positions in major centres such as Taipei), county municipality, borough, and neighbourhood levels. In 1950 (one year after the imposition of

viding the Taiwanese electorate with a consistent way to participate in political life. Although early elections had little to do with actual issues, they served a useful democratic purpose by allowing citizens to gain experience in casting a ballot on a regular schedule.³⁷ As evidence of this importance, voter turnout was consistently in the 80% range for the most important contests.³⁸

The Importance of Local Elites

As observed by the Japanese, Taiwan's local leaders wielded significant authority within Taiwanese society. Local gentry and landlords acted as a conservative, stabilizing force in Taiwan's rural areas, while business leaders maintained a similar role within Taiwan's urban centres. The KMT recognized this, and used local elections to bring these local elites into the governing party by offering them various favours that would benefit them financially and in reputation. The KMT was then able to use rural elites to implement a series of land reforms and business elites to undertake economic reform to enhance Taiwan's economic development, while maintaining political stability at the same time. Throughout its development, Taiwan maintained a relatively successful economic growth policy, and thus continued to benefit from the support of local elites.³⁹

Because the KMT was essentially an outsider regime from the Chinese Mainland, it was concerned with establishing and maintaining its legitimacy in Taiwan. The KMT would use local elections to gain the support of local elites and local factions by offering favours in exchange for party loyalty. More than simple payoffs, the KMT implemented a sophisticated system of patronage to reward these individuals for their loyalty. For rural elites, the KMT provided favourable agricultural loans and created national land policies that benefited landlords. For business elites, the KMT offered contracts for government services, including the control of natural monopoly corporations like transportation, cooperative banks, and gas corporations. Elites were offered positions within local government bodies to

enhance their economic and political interests in exchange for partnership with the KMT.⁴⁰

The KMT practice of co-opting local elite into the party and into the political process would frequently extend to Taiwan's youth, via the school system. Up until the late-1980s, each campus would have a military training cell as well as a "KMT club" that most bright, young people would join. Chiang Ching-kuo was himself head of the "KMT Youth Elite", and it was suggested by former student activist Jou Yi-Cheng that almost everyone who joined the KMT party in the 1980s had served in the youth organization.⁴¹

The creation of a system of patron-client relationships with local elites allowed the KMT to ensure that, "with time, both the political and economic interests of local elites became intertwined with the regime, bolstering its legitimacy."⁴² By co-opting local elites, the KMT was able to sideline opposition candidates from power, while at the same time expanding its influence and power at the local level, thus enhancing the regime's stability.

In addition, the KMT pitted rival factions against each other to compete for KMT candidacy, rather than against the KMT itself.⁴³ Because local elites wanted to gain access to KMT power networks, they would be encouraged to compete against rival elites to demonstrate who was the most loyal to the KMT in order to win nominations. As the Taiwanese economy grew throughout the 1960s, the business elite began competing more often for KMT nominations, in order to facilitate their economic interests. The state remained powerful enough, for a time, to keep business elites in check and maintain its political authority. However, as Taiwan's economy became increasingly successful, economic liberalization measures would eventually challenge this relationship.⁴⁴

More than co-opting local elites, the state was initially successful in bringing social movements within the KMT

fold. The KMT restricted dissent and punished organizations that opposed its rule outside of the sanctioned local elections system, and incorporated societal groups such as labour, student organizations, professionals, farmers, state employees and journalists within the KMT party structure.⁴⁵ Thus, if one wanted to participate in social organizations, in most cases, access could only be achieved through participation within the party, allowing the KMT to control virtually all sectors of civil society.⁴⁶

The KMT was particularly successful in co-opting the various aboriginal groups into the party structure. Throughout KMT rule, the state party could expect political support, at all levels of government, from well over 90% of the aboriginal population. In interviews with two aboriginal elite, it was suggested that the level of control enjoyed by the KMT during this time was the result of: the entrenched system of political patronage, KMT policies that sought to improve the living conditions of aboriginal people, and the simple fact that, for many years, the party was the state. Any rapid change could only be effected through the vehicle of the state party.⁴⁷

The Role of Opposition Movements in Local Elections

The KMT banned organized opposition parties and therefore, at the outset of local elections and continuing through the 1950s and 1960s, few independent candidates posed a serious challenge to the KMT's hold on local governing institutions. Non-KMT candidates were forced to run as independents and only on local issues, as formal opposition parties were banned by the KMT. Independent local candidates could not be connected to a larger opposition movement and could not run on national policy issues. Therefore, criticism of the government had a difficult time gaining momentum* 0.0879 in social organi-

Local elections thus provided avenues for political reformers to gain experience within the Taiwanese political system, and although they did not possess a significant degree of authority initially, as the democratic reform movement gained strength over time, the experience gained by local candidates enabled the reform movement to achieve significant electoral victories in subsequent elections for higher offices. Opposition movements were not able to make many inroads into the public policy domain throughout the first two-and-a-half decades of local elections un-

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communities with those on the Mainland, they allegedly gained a greater appreciation for the differences and a stronger sense of wanting to solidify their choice in government.⁵⁸

The Rise of the Opposition Movement: 1971 to 1977

Although throughout this period, local elections were dominated in most cases by the KMT, the possibility of gaining incremental victories in some high profile electoral contests encouraged opposition politicians to work within the existing political system to push for democratic reform. Independent candidates began to be respected by the Taiwanese electorate, and their influence was enhanced through subsequent elections. Local elections, therefore, had further unintended consequences for the KMT, in which momentum from the successes of independent candidates pushed the KMT to adopt greater measures of democratic reform.⁵⁹

As local elections continued through the 1970s, they became engrained within the political consciousness of the Taiwanese, making it very difficult to cancel elections even as opposition candidates became more successful over

market liberalization. Changing socio-economic trends such as increased living standards, greater access to education, and mass communication increased calls for social openness, civic participation, and ultimately democratic reform. As growing middle classes began to mobilize, a gradual undermining of KMT authority occurred. The KMT had to undertake democratic reforms to maintain its legitimacy by expanding electoral contests to certain provincial and national seats in 1972.⁶⁴ It should be

sage and would come to represent key wedge issues such as independence from China as well as important social welfare issues.

As discussed at the outset, there was a certain momentum to the election of opposition candidates. It was only after a more substantial number of opposition candidates were elected that the electorate truly began to believe that individuals outside of the state party could effect change, and that genuine "choice" was conceivable. The institutions of local elections would slowly begin to alter the democratic perceptions and expectations of the Taiwanese people.

The success of Taiwanese Tangwai candidates marked a shift in Taiwanese electoral and political history. Better than expected success was achieved at the local and provincial levels with several non-KMT candidates winning important seats. Although the KMT maintained its majority position for approximately two more decades, after 1977, the KMT never recovered its electoral monopoly; it never regained its pre-1977 seat share, and each subsequent contest intensified the pressure for change.⁷³

In one particular instance, a popular Tangwai candidate for county magistrate named Hsu Hsin-liang utilized Western campaign methods to achieve electoral success. Hsu employed student volunteers and mounted a professional campaign using posters and advertisements combined with dramatic speeches about public policy issues. With the experience he had gained in electoral politics due to the exposure of local elections, Hsu was able to score a significant victory against a well-known KMT candidate. This success and others like it stimulated the opposition movement.⁷⁴

With the benefit of hindsight the election of 1977 has been viewed as a watershed moment in Taiwan's transition to democracy. The political momentum seems unstoppable. Political partisans experiencing these changes at the time,

however, did not have this futuristic perspective, and several reported being truly shocked at the speed and extent of the resulting political changes in the 1980s. Ma Lai Ku Mai was a member of the KMT government at the county level at the height of the opposition movement. When Mr. Ku Mai and other local politicians learned of the movement they simply could not believe how much chaos there was at the upper levels of government and how much the KMT had lost control.⁷⁵ King-yuh Chang was likewise surprised when the opposition movement consolidated itself into the DPP; the KMT allegedly thought that Taiwan already had a form of democracy, as elections were being held and the Constitution was, in their view, being fol-

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munity and its own electorate. Ultimately, the moderate wings of the Tangwai movement gained strength and were able to push for greater democratic reforms over the subsequent decades.⁷⁷

The population began to grow critical of the regime's suppression of political reform and pointed to Sun Yat-sen's constitutional principles which advocated for democracy. The KMT was able to resist calls for further reform for a time, but as the voices of the opposition movement grew louder, the KMT faced problems of legitimacy in which the continued use of martial law encouraged opposition forces to insist that the regime was fundamentally undemocratic and did not intend to extend real political power to the electorate. It eventually became necessary for the KMT to make concessions to maintain its political legitimacy in Taiwan.⁷⁸

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instituted limited local elections that were gradually expanded over time and particularly after 1970 as the KMT's political monopoly became increasingly difficult to sustain.⁸³ The political institutions for local elections would help to instil within the Taiwanese people a democratic ethos that would ultimately become entrenched in subsequent decades. middle class, and economic liberalization contributed to a relatively stable civil society, creating vested interests in Taiwan's continued economic growth and therefore, in its social stability. According to Carothers, economic success

As Thomas Carothers notes, Taiwan's experience with political reform is quite rare. Carothers notes that, broadly speaking, there are two main paths for democratic reform under authoritarian regimes. The first method sees the authoritarian regime collapse due to a lack of legitimacy through popular uprisings, revolutions, or similar overthrows of dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. The second path takes place when the authoritarian regime gradually releases control over the state through liberalization initiatives, in which social, economic, and political reforms are expanded in a manageable way and the goal of consolidated democracy is eventually achieved.

Electoral reform in Taiwan represents the latter and rarer case, in which the dictatorial regime gradually changes its stripes and left power through an electoral process. Carothers observes this process has only occurred in a small number of countries including Taiwan, Chile, Mexico, and to some degree South Korea (which combined gradual reform but experienced political unrest to a significant degree). Usually, as Carothers notes, attempted transitions to democracy are defined by the first path – the crash of the incumbent dictatorial regime.⁸⁴

The crash of the KMT did not occur in Taiwan's democratic transition and it remains essentially on par with the DPP in terms of its electoral success. Carothers observes that in successful gradualist transitions, certain preconditions exist within given countries that contribute to relatively stable democratic reform. As in Taiwan's case, a strong record of economic success, the growth of an educated

Therefore, the opposition movement was able to strengthen its power through continued electoral participation, and at the same time, this tolerated forum for dissent was engrained within the Taiwanese political process and among the electorate. Taiwan can therefore serve as a model for gradual democratic reform for other countries with similar characteristics. Carothers is correct to note that gradual democratic reform has been successful in only a handful of cases. Taiwan possessed all of the right preconditions for democratic reform to occur in a gradual and relatively stable process – namely economic success and the growth of an educated middle class, and a system of local elections that allowed legitimate political dissent through an organized process.

Notes

- 1 Hung-mao Tien & Tun-jen Cheng, *Crafting Democratic Institutions, Democratization in Taiwan: Implications for China* (Hong Kong, Basingstoke, New York: Hong Kong University Press, 1999).
- 2 The concept of democracy is, in fact, so value laden that even its surrounding terminology can create impassioned debate. In interviews with members of the Taiwan Institute of Economic Research, it was suggested that it might be more appropriate to call Taiwan's democratization process a "transformation," rather than a "transition." It was believed by one interviewee that the term "transition" may put too much of a focus on certain watershed moments. Changes in Taiwan should, more accurately, be viewed in light of the entire process, as a complex and cumulative series of events. (See Appendix B)
- 3 Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
- 4 Freedom House is a non-partisan and broad based NGO founded in 1941 to promote democratic values abroad. Freedom House believes that "American leadership in international affairs is essential to the cause of human rights and freedom." Among Freedom House's publications is *Freedom in the World* survey. This annual survey measures various indicators of freedom in different countries to develop an overall score indicating the level of freedom of a given nation. For more information, visit www.freedomhouse.org.
- 5 Dr. Yun-han Chu, a prominent academic in Taiwan, has reached similar conclusions with respect to some of the "necessary" (if not sufficient) conditions for state building. Dr. Chu has opined that basic, functioning bureaucratic structures are required, as is some form of local governance. Local elections in Taiwan, of course, preceded its formal "democracy" by over 40 years. (See Appendix B)
- 6 Robert Dahl, "A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation," *Political Science Quarterly* 109.1 (Spring 1994).
- 7 Hung-mao Tien, *Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Development, Taiwan's Electoral Politics and Democratic Transition: Riding the Third Wave*, ed. Hung-mao Tien (USA: East Gate Books, M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 1996).
- 8 These were the words of Minister Yao Chia-Wen, in discussions on Taiwan's transition to democracy, in July of 2005. Minister Yao has gained unique perspectives on Taiwan, both as a social leader in the 1970s and as a political prisoner in

- the 1980s. Throughout his incarceration, the Minister read extensively and was able to truly reflect on, among other things, Taiwan's history and society. (See Appendix B)
- 9 Minister Jinn-Rong Yeh has opined that Taiwan is "unique" among all the forces that have tried to change the country over the years. It is perhaps because of its history with foreign leadership that Taiwan continues to struggle to find its own unique culture. The quest for a truly "Taiwanese" identity was a recurring theme throughout discussions with academics, politicians and activists in Taiwan in July of 2005. (See Appendix B)
- 10 Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy* (London: Routledge Press, 1999) 35-37.
- 11 Rigger 38.
- 12 George H. Kerr, *Formosa: Licensed Revolution and the Home Rule Movement: 1895-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974) 169.
- 13 The initial excitement of the Taiwanese with respect to this change quickly dissipated when the population realized that the KMT leaders would be even more repressive than their Japanese predecessors. Dr. Lung-chu Chen provided a rather telling slogan from the time: "The dogs are gone, but the pigs have been traded in." (See Appendix B)
- 14 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh & Emerson M S Niou, "Salient Issues in Taiwan's Electoral Politics," *Electoral Studies* 15.2 (1996).
- 15 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "The SNTV System and its Political Implications," *Taiwan's Electoral Politics* 93-195.
- 16 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "SNTV,"
- 17 Rigger 39.
- 18 Rigger 22.
- 19 See Appendix B.
- 20 See Appendix B, p. 32; Interview with Johnny Chiang.
- 21 Denny Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) 79.
- 22 Rigger 59.
- 23 It is interesting to note how pervasive the argument justifying the imposition of martial law over four decades is, particularly among those with some prior affiliation with the former KMT regime. In interviews conducted in July of 2005, the extensive tenure of military rule by the KMT was still justified as having been necessary due to the military and communist threat from the Mainland. (See Appendix B)
- 24 Yangsun Chou & Andrew Nathan, "Democratizing Transition in Taiwan," *Asian Survey* 27.3 (1987).
- 25 Chyuan-Jeng Shiau, "Elections and the Changing State-Business Relationship," *Taiwan's Electoral Politics and Democratic Transition*.
- 26 Steven J. Hood, *The Kuomintang and the Democratization of Taiwan* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) 29.
- 27 Steve Tsang, "Transforming a Party State into a Democracy," *Democratization in Taiwan: Implications for China*.
- 28 Christian Schafferer, *The Power of the Ballot Box: Political Development and Election Campaigning in Taiwan* (USA: Lexington Books, 2003) 34.
- 29 Rigger 65.
- 30 Lai Tse-han, Ramon Myers & Wei Wou, *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947* (USA: Stanford University Press, 1991) 69.
- 31 Schafferer 85-88.
- 32 Schafferer 33.
- 33 See Appendix B. Interviews with King-yuh Chang; and Yun-han Chu.
- 34 Roy 86.
- 35 Roy 87.
- 36 Tun-jen Cheng, "Democratizing the Quasi-Leninist Regime in Taiwan," *World Politics* 41 (July 1989).
- 37 Rigger 18-19.
- 38 James A. Robinson, "China's Local Elections in Contrast with Taiwan's," *Taipei Times* 1 February 2000.
- 39 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "Elections," 210.
- 40 Hsieh, "Elections," 215-218.
- 41 S; an36 [(l) 0. (p. 265.)]TJ T* 0 Tw [426 Tenu, "Elections and Taiwan," 219.
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