

How the changing relationship between labour and political party influenced growth of autonomous labour unions in Taiwan

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to find how the changing relationship between labour and political parties influenced the growth of reasonably independent labour unions in Taiwan.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors have drawn on data collected through in-depth interviews of union officials, labour activists and members of legislature from two major political parties in Taiwan.

Findings – The authors found that the breach between labour and political parties was affected by the eventualities contemplated in democratisation. Though the DPP (Minchin-tang/Democratic Progressive Party) provided the initial “shot in arm”, autonomous unions have not necessarily grown underneath DPP’s dominion. Political liberalisation of Taiwan’s industrial relations systems has gained more momentum when the DPP was in opposition than in power. Anti-incumbency pushed independent unions to sway the opposition’s backing when Kuomintang (KMT/the Chinese Nationalists) was in power and not to that extent when the KMT stepped down. The autonomous labour movement in Taiwan was initially influenced by the changing relationship between labour and ruling parties. However, the movement was subsequently shaped by the ethnic and political characteristics based on the historical divide between the mainlanders and Taiwanese and Taiwan’s changing economic landscape.

Research limitations/implications – Specific limitations include the subjectivity of the inference and lack of generalisability of the findings that are based on interviews with two out of three players of industrial relations system.

Practical implications – Because of globalisation and global financial crisis that brought together a new generation of workforce who hold individualistic values, have lesser faith in collectivism and perform new forms of work where unionisation is no more relevant, the autonomous labour movement in Taiwan was hugely impacted.

Originality/value – Growth of independent unions is not being shaped by democratisation alone. If we refocus the debate about democracy’s implied relationship with the rhetoric of national identity, one can see the crucial role played by the changing economic landscape and ethnic divisions ingrained in political origins.

Keywords Taiwan, Autonomous labour movement, Industrial relation systems

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The rise of independent (or autonomous) unions has become a global phenomenon. Though there are many countries with a history of close ties between labour organisations and political parties, we are seeing an increased “distancing” as unions try to delink and pursue more autonomous strategies[1] excepting the communist states like China (Liu, 2010) and Cuba (Alexander, 2002), where the labour movement is still a part of the ruling party. This close tie between ruling parties and labour unions has also tended to linger in countries that have turned from long authoritarian rule to democracy. After Korea turned democratic, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions continued to enjoy a close relationship with the ruling party (Kang, 2009), whereas the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions is more independent.

“Independent union” and “autonomous union” have been used interchangeably.



Likewise, Taiwan turned democratic in 1987, but the Chinese Federation of Labour (CFL) enjoys a close relationship with the Kuomintang (KMT/the Chinese Nationalists) whereas the Taiwan Confederation of Trade Unions (TCTU) claims to be more independent though critics have pointed out its closeness with KMT's main rival, the DPP (*Minchin-tang*/Democratic Progressive Party). Besides, the state-owned enterprise (SOE) unions maintained their closeness with the ruling KMT even after lifting of the martial law until KMT's government was toppled by the DPP in 2000. Nevertheless, over two decades there has been growth in a number of reasonably independent unions. By independent unions, we mean unions who are not "self-claimed independent" but strictly maintain distance from political parties and do not get involved in party activity or accept financial support from any party including the ruling party as they tend to remain free from the employer and state control (Troy, 1961). In the context of Taiwan, Ho (2017, p. 137, 2014a,b, pp. 151-566) has cautioned us that the term "independent union movement" normally encompasses "yellow unions" who have freed them from KMT's control but anti-KMT sentiments remain prevalent among their leaders and so they are not politically neutral. We too have noticed that unions who escaped KMT's clutch normally maintained closeness with *dangwai* ("outside party" democratic movement).

While in some countries the labour severs ties with the ruling party instantaneously, unions in Taiwan pursued gradualism. Gradualist conception of independent union designates reproduction of a normative structure of industrial democracy where labour slowly quit the government's inescapable "clutch". These two approaches (instantaneous and gradual) shape the autonomous labour movement differently. Therefore, it is important to pose a research question:

RQ1. How did the breach between labour and political party in Taiwan (Chen *et al.*, 2003; Ho, 2006) foster the growth of reasonably independent unions and how the relationship between the two changed with time?

Since 1949, Taiwan's industrial relations system (IRS) had a bearing on the "collusion" between labour and the ruling party. Though unions have grown, and so has the labour power to some extent, growth of reasonably independent unions went on after 2000 and gained momentum after 2008. However, considering the history of labour's closeness to the ruling party, many had a sneaking suspicion that the "labour friendly DPP" (Ho, 2006) may win over the newly-formed/re-constituted independent unions. On the contrary, changes in affiliations of large unions were seldom noticed (Ho, 2006), though it does not imply that the independent unions have grown during DPP's rule during 2000-2008.

So, has the ruling DPP furthered autonomous labour movement as claimed by Ho (2006) or the DPP is no different from its rival and party's methods were only different? Has the DPP maintained closeness in subtle form with few like TCTU to maintain its position of a party that does not adopt "union control" policy? Has autonomous labour movement gained momentum after DPP lost in 2008? Has KMT's President Ma's government during 2008-2016 contributed to the growth of independent unions? Are the current DPP government's policies helping to bring independent unions closer to it? These and many more similar questions remain unanswered.

The Taiwanese case has a broader interest since its democracy has matured through surviving crises. The KMT and DPP are the two main parties. There is political instability too as none remained in power for long. Differences between the two on cross-strait relation and "1992 consensus" have broadened after DPP's Tsai Ing-Wen held the presidency in 2016. Former DPP President Chen Sui-Ben's moderate stance towards "One-China" policy is in deep contrast with President Tsai's stance of "one-country-on-each-side" (*Economist*, 2016). The economy has reached stagnation[2] (Chen, 2016) and "allegedly" worsened because of President Tsai's stance on cross-strait that affected industrial and economic growth. So, the present DPP government may turn hostile to unions alike rival KMT if unions come in its way of bringing reforms for speedy recovery of economy.

From a pure theoretical position, the independent labour movement is not a *sine qua non* of democracy, yet we argue that in a democratic political system, the union movement is led by those who take up critical stance *vis-à-vis* the government (“independent”) (Roxborough, 1981). Our study matter derives from a preliminary reflection on the encouraging premises of the Taiwanese autonomous labour movement. The first part of the paper provides a critical review of the broad interpretations of historical literature reflecting on state’s repression over unions followed by the breach between them. The second part emphasises on the role of democratic consolidation. The third part opens with methodology followed by findings. The final part concludes with our main argument that Taiwan’s autonomous labour movement although was initially influenced by the changing relationship between labour and government, the changing economic landscape, which has given birth to a working class that is highly individualistic, seldom choose to work in old economy sectors or continue with traditional forms of work, alongside ethnic and political characteristics based on the historical division between the mainlanders and Taiwanese (Congiu, 2012) also have contributed in shaping the movement.

Taiwan’s labour history

A lot is written on KMT’s rule during pre- and post-1987, which we will not reproduce here (see Ho, 2006; Lee, 2014; Chen *et al.*, 2003; Congiu, 2012; Wakabayashi, 1997; Shen, 2001). Since our focus is on labour, we will restrict our literature review to emphasise on state’s control over unions to begin. During KMT’s rule, the unions were seen as “government’s auxiliary institution and administrative arm” (Chen *et al.*, 2003, p. 315). KMT-regime turned angst ridden towards independent representation by labour, which appears logical to Ho (2006) since the KMT had to endure a miserable existence back in mainland with labour organisations (Deyo, 1989; Freeman, 1994). KMT made efforts to build a monopolistic image to “repress autonomous articulation of the subordinate class demands” (Schmitter, 1979, p. 25). Unions were controlled by KMT’s authoritarian policy[3] (Freeman, 1994; Lee *et al.*, 1995) since the party intended to attain economic growth through maintaining industrial harmony and bring political stability in the island nation against the threat of Communist invasion from the mainland.

With the multi-party system becoming a legitimate option, the KMT government established the Council of Labour Affairs (Ministry of Labour from 2014). Workers were allowed to collectivise. KMT government enacted legislations that offered safeguards to labour. The government made employers accountable for the maintenance of labour standards. Employers’ participation in smooth execution of government’s policies were made binding on firms. Whether KMT government wanted to liberalise Taiwan’s IRS or moved for legislative changes under pressure from a coalition between *dangwai* and “yellow unions” is not known to us.

As domestic firms started relocating to countries with cheaper labour because of stringent domestic laws (Lai and Sarkar, 2017), Taiwanese labour renounced their complacency. To oppose submissive KMT-controlled unions, anti-KMT activists built unauthorised enterprise-based overlapping unions. Few were militant. During the years of “Taiwan miracle” (late 1960s until 1980s) when the country witnessed rapid economic progress, SOE workers never had any special attachment toward their unions because of extravagant pay and privileges. However, SOE unions also turned confrontational when they felt threatened by the privatisation of SOEs. Taiwan Labour Front (TFL) and Labour Federation of Independent Unions (LFIU) were formed in the late 1980s by violating the Labour Union Law (LUL). Ruling KMT did not forbid their formation as the party has gradually started withdrawing from its stand of controlling unions. By the late 1980s, the KMT central committee tried to restructure its function to mitigate its relationship with unions and NGOs; but by the 1990s, KMT was under internal power struggle and no one in the party was aware of possible consequences, which include losing control over the labour movement.

However, labour and state began drifting apart around 20 years back when labour movement grew to oppose privatisation, which by 1989 happened to be an “explicit policy of

the ruling KMT” (McBeath, 1997, pp. 1145-1146). Privatisation faced SOE unions’ steep opposition, but “rise of grassroots challenges did not signal the demise” (Ho, 2006) of KMT-CFL duo until KMT stepped down in 2000. Change in power was instrumental in organising TCTU as an alternative to the CFL. Political democratisation prompted liberalisation of IRS to some extent. With democratic consolidation, Taiwan gradually shifted towards willing acceptance of a liberalised IRS (Chen *et al.*, 2003; Ho, 2006, 2010; Lee, 2014) although through a process that was complex than meets the eye.

Independent unions established soon after 1987 were workplace based (barring independent occupation unions) with focus on local issues, whereas those formed after 1995 tend to apply both workplace and non-workplace methods. Former got dissolved once the issues were addressed (Lee, 2000) and the latter seldom succeeded (see Lee, 2010) as members became disenchanting. Between 1987 and 2000, three types of independent unions were formed with the last one being partly successful because of their covert proximity to DPP. Nevertheless, it is hard to establish a clear-cut relationship between reasonably independent unions and “labour friendly DPP” until 2000. Moreover, a liberalised IRS was not sufficiently indicative of growth in labour power, as workers’ genuine interest in organising is what matters most. Change in Taiwan’s economy after the global financial crisis of 2008 fostered growth of small entrepreneurs, self-employed, street vendors and home-based workers. This group did not have natural inclinations towards collectivisation. New generation of workforce was individualistic. Average Taiwanese did not prefer working in poor working conditions in large-scale industries and chose to remain self-employed, which adversely affected the labour movement.

Method

Our research is qualitative and historical in nature. Since “KMT clientelism is individualistic” (Ho, 2014a, b), to understand how the party operated, we asked the reasonably independent unions to share their experience during KMT’s rule. For the DPP, we relied on its councillors and few unions who maintained closeness with DPP albeit having no formal affiliation. We used secondary archival data on independent unions, supplemented by in-depth interviews. The first author conducted field studies between October 16 and May 17 and interviewed 18 independent union officials from Taipei, Kaohsiung, Tainan and Taichung. From four major SOE unions, nine officials and five labour activists were interviewed too. Two former KMT ministers and two DPP legislators took part in in-depth discussion. Union officials provided their perspective on factors that contributed to growth of the autonomous labour movement, whereas the members of legislature yielded insights into factors that triggered the breach and how it sustained or failed. Each interview that took about three hours was audiotaped, transcribed and analysed.

Findings

We described the chain of occurrences that influenced autonomous labour movement in Taiwan to show how gradualist conception of reasonably independent unions was shaped by broad economic and socio-political changes between 1987 and 2017. Union instrumentality and changes in the country’s economic landscape alone did not have bearing on the growth of reasonably independent unions. “Ethnic divisions ingrained in political origins” (Congiu, 2012, p. 226) played its part as well.

Political history of the rise of independent unions in Taiwan

As the transformation of IRS in Taiwan did not happen overnight, so was the growth of autonomous labour movement. Development of independent unions in Taiwan hinged on factors including innate characteristics of the country’s labour movement, changing political and economic landscape, KMT’s indifference towards labour in the initial years after 1987,

DPP's dilemma between clinging to a populist issue, namely, "independence or unification" vs favouring independence of labour over controlling unions, rising informalisation and casualisation of work and employment, and growth in population who chose to stay away from core sectors. Democratisation is believed to have given rise to the autonomous labour movement. While we do not dispute it, we intend to highlight other factors to establish the complexity of the overall process that the labour movement in Taiwan went through.

Although the KMT applied the "co-optation strategies", yet, the 1950s' anti-KMT wave^[4] yielded alternative political choices. These gradually integrated into *dangwai* embodying Taiwanese bourgeois interests of taking over KMT's "political positions that was monopolized by the mainlanders" (Chao and Myers, 1998; Kan, 1998 cited by Congiu, 2012, pp. 227-228). The moderate wing of *dangwai* earned its official status in 1986 as the DPP. DPP's formation indicated the "legal strengthening of middle-class hegemony" (p. 228). Mobilising the relatively independent unions helped DPP to organise for election. Historically, workers in Taiwan seldom cared about anything except their jobs and wage. During the years of "Taiwan miracle", when the country witnessed rapid economic progress many chose to start their own businesses. According to Sheikh, it was a period full of opportunities for entrepreneurs. SOE unions were submissive to KMT's control, and there was no union agenda because the SOE workers were enjoying maximum privileges.

It was only by the 1990s, owing to KMT's policy position on SOEs' privatisation, workers sided with the relatively independent unions (Chang, 2001) and took interest in union activities. Most of them had the DPP's support (Ho, 2003; Congiu, 2012, p. 229). Labour benefited from its proximity to the DPP (Gray, 2015). The short-lived alliance paid off to the DPP through "workers' votes in local elections" (Gray, 2015) and helped workers to push their agenda in electoral politics. Activities of the TLF, which got engaged in electoral campaigns during 1992-1996, were adapted by the DPP as its labour policy for approaching the election. Independent labour activists allegedly maintained a connection with the DPP. TPWU's official avowed, "Had we not campaigned for DPP, it would have been challenging for the party to win seats in 1992 election". However, the alliance lasted barely until 2000. After forming the government, the DPP shifted from "pro-labour" to "pro-independence" position, which the labour activists failed to appreciate. DPP's changed position is attributed to the instant gain that party envisioned from bonding with a populist issue like "independence vs unification". "Such issue easily polarize voters compared to issue like espousing independent labour movement over having control on unions, which need not even attract the labour voters always", avowed IU-9.

However, the anti-KMT movement though spearheaded the foundation of the autonomous labour movement and grew underneath moderate reformers' political and cultural rhetoric, yet failed to culminate into a formal alliance with *dangwai*. Segregation between reasonably independent unions siding with the DPP and rest maintaining closeness with the KMT did not last beyond 2000.

State of reasonably independent unions in Taiwan after 2000

A lot is written about DPP's betrayal of working class where the party supported privatisation of SOEs after coming to power in 2000 (see Gray, 2015; McBeath, 1997, p. 1150; Chen and Wong, 2002, pp. 42-43; Arrigo, 1994; Congiu, 2012). According to some, this was rational because in a "overgrown crisis-prone" country like Taiwan, the issues of privatisation and democratisation go parallel to turn the country into a "vibrant civil society". Moreover, the ruling DPP wanted to end the regulated market economy so that it can dismantle rival's power base (McBeath, 1997, p. 1150) since the majority of SOE unions were controlled by the KMT. Another group believes that the DPP wore "Taiwanese identity veil to make political representation of the economic interests of native bourgeoisie" (Congiu, 2012, p. 229 citing Arrigo's argument) since privatisation was fitting the interest of the Taiwanese bourgeoisie.

However, the repercussion was not negligible. “It was a blow to our expectation from the ‘labour friendly DPP’”, lamented a labour activist who requested for anonymity. “By the end of the 1990s, workers’ common perception was that if DPP comes to power then ruling KMT’s anti-labour policies will get curbed. But, when DPP was elected, there was no change in the government’s tone on economic reforms” shared IU-1. Consequently, “yellow unions” who freed from KMT’s clutch tend to shun away allegiance to the DPP. Though DPP government recognised several independent unions (e.g. teachers’ union) and a few affiliated to CFL also turned independent (Kleingartner and Peng, 1991), they allegedly maintained distance from the DPP. For CTWU’s former leader IU-2, it is not shocking. As a leader of CTWU, he chose to cutoff ties with both parties (Sarkar and Chang, 2010). “Allegiance with any party would take away our freedom of being critical of government. Being in SOE that was getting divested by KMT government, we decided to fight on our own, so that we don’t have obligation to DPP” shared IU-2.

Opening of the competitive global market made “democratisation of politics [by DPP] to be ‘capital-friendly’” (Congiu, 2012, p. 229). Small entrepreneurs, self-employed, street vendors, and home-based workers have grown. “Unfortunately, class consciousness did not exist amongst them”, lamented IU-7. Service industries grew. With soaring unemployment rate most chose to cater directly to the rising domestic consumption through entrepreneurship, which has its trace to “Taiwan miracle”. Youth chose to be a part of the labour market that has rising demand for skilled labour. Deeply embedded societal individualism left them devoid of class-consciousness. Firms adopted organic ways (implementing performance pay and outsourcing) to counter collectivism (see Sarkar, 2009). New economy sectors did not welcome collectivisation. Union density shrunk. Politically affiliated unions were severely hit. Parties allegedly delink them from unions.

Although DPP’s Chen Sui-Ben did not compromise its “Taiwan-first” supporters’ anti-China position, economic liberalisation was apparently not in DPP’s control. DPP’s policies smoothened outflow of FDI. Several Taiwanese firms shifted to mainland. However, the KMT-controlled unions represented majority firms. “Natives who lost their jobs since their firms shifted to mainland connected KMT-controlled unions’ position of not opposing shift of business to mainland with KMT’s style of liberalizing economy that clinched to ‘taitong’ (unification of Taiwan with mainland)” said IU-1. DPP capitalised on the development by bringing the historical bloc of ethnic divide between natives and mainlanders.

It was a time when reasoning borrowed from economic and political theories was not sufficient for explaining independent labour movement unless one intertwines it with the logical reasoning derived from sociology. When working class started blaming the DPP government’s policies for their misfortune, the liberalisation already began feeding the interests of bourgeoisie in mainland. Though for some it was a mere coincidence, the DPP government did not miss the chance to prove to Taiwanese people that opposition KMT cares for mainlanders’ interests more than their since KMT-controlled unions did not oppose their firms’ shift of base to the mainland. DPP government allegedly wanted to gain political mileage from the “historical bloc” that fragmented workers (Tung, 1996). Independent unions supported the alternative mode, which would not rob their jobs to meet mainlanders’ interests. There was “mainland phobia” amongst workers. From an unadorned split between pro-labour and pro-capital views, a deeper divide was between KMT that favoured *taitung* and the DPP that favoured *taidu* (independence of Taiwan).

However, political representation along the identity lines did not transform the capital-labour issue into an ethnic one. Instead, both blended. Liberalisation triggered labour uprising as workers feared layoff, but one group favoured trade relaxation that would bridge ethnic divide (*taitung*), while the other did not (*taidu*). “By remaining close to mainland we could boost Taiwan’s economy, which will percolate down and benefit natives, especially when Taiwan’s export driven economy has remained traditionally dependent on mainland”, avowed KMT-1.

So, has the DPP reaped from the political-cum-ethnic divide as it allegedly intended? Did the party align with subaltern independent unions who dared KMT's hegemony that represents mainlanders' ascendancy? Alternatively, has the gap between independent unions and the DPP widened since workers overall were furious over joblessness and pay cut because of economic liberalisation? Or, was there a new breed of independent unions who embraced industrialisation that is at the best interest of primordialistic concept of national identity over "industrial de-localisation towards mainland" (Congiu)?

What brought change in the growth of independent unions?

When the KMT stepped down in 2000, it "made an abrupt about-face" (Ho, 2006, pp. 130-146). It backed labour in their battle against the DPP's policies[5]. But for those who had freed from the KMT's control, the party's "about turn" was seen as an "unqualified opportunism". KMT's agenda was in stark contrast to what it did before 2000[6]. DPP won the second term.

Instead of playing its "political opportunism card", KMT should have prudently created a unique stand on liberalising IRS, believes an independent labour activist, LA-1. Per TSTWU's official, "such position should hinge on raising workers' concerns without disputing (DPP) government's every move so that it befits independent activists as it enthralls the KMT's loyalists". Stooping to "mainland phobia" could prevented the KMT from portraying itself as one that puts ideological position above country's economy. "By advocating for investment in mainland, the KMT promoted both de-localization and de-industrialisation", admitted KMT-1. Therefore, the question is: if KMT failed, has the DPP gained?

When DPP lost in 2008, it seldom chose to share closeness with major unions barring few like TCTU. After 1987, the only independent union that claimed equivalence with the KMT supported CFL, namely, the TCTU had several leaders from the DPP during its formation. The TCTU was legalised during DPP's Chen Shui-Ben's presidency. The first President of the TCTU was a member of the DPP. DPP shared closeness with TCTU, and to some extent, the same holds true until date. However, the DPP seldom insisted on issues, which it dishonoured when it held presidency during 2000–2008. "Being in opposition the DPP reaped benefit from its association with new non-SOE independent industrial unions", said DPP-2.

There has been a complex power struggle between occupation, enterprise, and industrial unions in Taiwan. When independent camp won seats in the early 1990s, the KMT's stronghold occupation unions frustrated the independent camp's attempts, but the KMT did not pay attention to the industrial unions. It believed that its "one-company-one-union" rule (per the LUL) would not be defied, but the DPP made the most of the loophole in the LUL's Article 47 that allows industrial unions to establish local federations without occupation unions' participation. Besides, the DPP delegated power to its Southern-County offices to secure grassroots support.

A DPP councillor revealed, "It was more credible for the independent unions to accept support from the opposition DPP since the party seldom applied its growing support base to vandalize KMT government". It boycotted the KMT government's investment policy on increasing FDI in the mainland. DPP promoted "anti-mainland nationalist" character of its economic policies and, thus, became closer to workers suffering from mainland phobia. "We thought the DPP would stop massive lay-off if it holds presidency again as it would stop opening the SOEs to Chinese investors", remembered IU-7. Outflow of FDI to the mainland was a bigger concern than privatisation. "If privatisation is inevitable, the divestment should go off within Taiwan considering the potential of native capitalists over mainlanders' power to acquire Taiwanese firms", avowed IU-5. It kindles a new phenomenon.

Other factors influencing the collective actions by unions include the global financial crisis of 2008, which was the worst blow to the export led-manufacturing sectors due to shrinking global market demand. Economic slow-down caused massive lay-offs, wage cuts, unpaid leaves and

irregularity of employment, which generated unrest and anger among working class and subsequently added momentum to labour movement during KMT's tenure (2008–2016).

Consequently, several reasonably independent industrial unions started participating in the opposition DPP's demonstration. DPP's pro-independence stand succeeded as a "boon" to manage the innate conflict between KMT government's pro-industrialisation policy and privatisation as its consequence. Besides, when the KMT won the presidential election in 2008, the minimum wage turned as one of the crucial issues around which unions started organising. Back in 2006, when unions protested on the same issue many being under the reign of the DPP seldom chose to break up with DPP but with the KMT coming to power, the DPP friendly unions did not hesitate to take to street to join the rank of protests on wage issue.

However, by being in power during 2008–2016, KMT's President Ma's approach was different from his party predecessors. The KMT government adopted a proactive stance towards labour during the 2008 global financial crisis. To alleviate problem related to mass lay-off because of the financial crisis, the government launched several programs. The first two labour ministers were feminist activist (Wang, 2008-2012) and unionist (Pan, 2012-2014), respectively, who adopted numerous labour friendly policies.

The government modified Collective Agreement Act and the Act for Settlement of Labour-Management Disputes during 2009–2010 so that strong unions need not depend on government's intervention (tripartism) and can negotiate with employers directly (bipartism). The minimum wage was revised in favour of workers. Other areas in which President Ma's government enacted or reformed existing legislation are pension (2008), parental leave (2009), gender equality at workplace, unemployment benefits and Labour Rights Funds (2009), over and above taking relatively minor but pro-labour steps such as introducing Typhoon leave in 2009. Overall, the KMT finally paid long overdue attention to the labour movement allegedly not to control the unions but to help liberalising Taiwan's IRS.

Future of independent unions in Taiwan

Though the opposition DPP came closer to independent unions during 2008–2016, the gap between the two has hardly tilled, which to some extent was because of the KMT's Ma's relatively pro-labour policies and approach adopted during KMT's rule. After 2016, President Tsai's policy on "2012 consensus[7]", which embodied native's cultural hegemony over mainlanders, brought in loss of mainland's investment in Taiwan. President Tsai dragged her feet in accepting "One-China" principle. This irked Beijing, shelved cross-strait exchanges, and left Taiwanese firms and labour in despair. This situation is different from what Congiu reported a decade back[8]. Today, there is an overall slow-down in export, which is causing resentment amongst local workers. For local workers the issue of "independence or unification" apparently faded out against their economic well-being, which is under threat.

By the end of KMT's second term, there was partisan union strategy that stands in contrast to what is pursued in the west. The split within independent unions on "independence or unification" has not let every reasonably independent union to support the DPP. "Independent unions failed to build consensus on whether they should support the DPP (in 2016 election) because the party cloaked its stance on cross-strait relations. If Taiwan under the DPP's rule has to survive, then its export dominant economy can thrive only if the country establishes fresh trade links with other countries. But the mainland's influence on those countries will not allow it!" shared KMT-2.

Although unions shifted their focus from economic interest to political line stimulated by the "mainland phobia" (Gray, 2015), a change[9] that apparently helped the DPP, there was no clear mandate of labour voters in 2016 Presidential election. The DPP cared for the support of disgruntled elements. Around three-fourths of Taiwan's legislators are from urban constituencies comprising of labour voters. By seeking unions' support, parties tried to build permanent means of influence during elections. "Unlike in underdeveloped

countries where unions rely on parties, unions in Taiwan align with parties that believe in supporting labour. Today, both KMT and DPP want to make Taiwan a preferred destination for foreign investors at the cost of sacrificing labour rights", shared IU-7. Besides, bribery in election mostly works in rural Taiwan where vote brokers, commonly the village heads, are presumably powerful than the local union leaders. This system does not work in cities where weak interpersonal ties and anonymity make bribery less effective. Therefore, union leaders succeeded in influencing labour voters in vast urban areas.

While DPP fell back on the rift between pro- and anti-government forces in influencing labour voters, the KMT did not ignore it either. The KMT was interested in organising in industries that were sympathetically disposed towards party's economic objectives. After 2016, DPP's nationalist economic model struggled to withstand the mainland-friendly KMT's criticism. Because of deteriorating economic condition, reasonably independent unions began delinking from the DPP. Some have not mind in restoring back ties with the KMT, which is believed to be a political strategy to restore economic ties with mainland. "Anti-DPP activists allegedly colluded with opposition KMT to protest against the DPP government's proposed work-week and holiday policies. The offended tone came with mounting voters' discontentment against the backdrop of DPP government's "policy flip-flop" and "indecision over labour holidays" (Yang, 2016). In December 2017, DPP government amended workweek and holiday regulations, which were prejudicial to workers. Intellectuals and labour activists took to the street. Eight human rights commissioners appointed by President Tsai made a joint statement against the reform, though their effort went to no avail. Major mass rallying had independent and SOE unions' participation. Unions island-wide were undergoing a Referendum aiming to restore the lost national holidays and revised working conditions.

Being in opposition, the DPP seldom displayed the retaliatory side of politics, but President Tsai's discordant policies (e.g. demanding KMT to return "ill-gotten assets") have invited criticism. Reasonably independent unions who until now shared closeness with the DPP (e.g. Education Unions) began protesting the proposed public sector pension cuts. "How can you expect us to continue supporting DPP? Tsai regime won't crack down on us but is indirectly curtailing our power" questioned IU-11.

"President Tsai is more vocal compared to her party predecessors in her stand on not opening up Taiwan's economy to mainland. She came with clearer, stronger stance on Taiwan's independence. Yet, her policy on appeasing one section of working class by cutting down other's privileges came as a shocker", lamented IU-14. Critics of President Tsai hinted on her dithering policies on cutting government expenditure by making anti-labour moves. If she has to combat opposition's criticism, she must succeed in reclaiming trust from South-Asian and Latin American investors as alternative to the mainland. However, this policy position might annihilate workers in short-run.

Can President Tsai's government correct its labour policies? For all practical purpose, it looks easier said than done because of waning global trade, stagnant wages, falling tourism, electricity shortfalls, reverse globalisation, Beijing's policy on Taiwan, rapid contractualisation and casualisation of work, and fading relevance of Taiwanese hegemony on mainlanders among independent unions. A plurality of factors lies at the origins of independent unions, especially the political and economic dynamics that had taken root in Taiwanese society exemplified by ethnic divisions.

Instead of creating opportunities for DPP, the incumbency has pulled back the moderates within DPP from restoring alliances with reasonably independent unions. Was it a premeditated move of DPP? Though DPP-2 confirmed, saying, "DPP deliberately keep independent unions at arm length when it is in power, so that state control on union never breeds", the KMT-2 argued saying, "DPP disregarded its support base as it is under pressure of party's position on strengthening Taiwanese middle-class hegemony".

DPP got another chance to prove its fidelity to labour, but it brought back the neo-centrist labour policies and as a result, working class is likely to see more reforms that are allegedly unwarranted. Political democratisation fulfilled its promise of delivering diverse perspectives that include political representation on nationality and post-nationalist democratisation. However, it could not pledge widening the scope of industrial democracy as anticipated by the labour voters in 2016 election.

Discussion and conclusion

If scholars believed in a latent relationship between ethnic and political characteristics based on the historical divide between PRC/mainlanders and ROC/Taiwanese *vis-à-vis* democratic politics in Taiwan (see Congiu, 2012) and the growing trust between the DPP and reasonably independent unions (Ho, 2006), then linkage of political democratisation with autonomous labour movement in Taiwan, much has been misconceived. We may not be able to defend a comprehensive blueprint of growth of reasonably independent unions that is not being shaped by democratisation alone, yet what we do hope is to refocus the debate about democracy's implied relationship with the rhetoric of national identity, away from the idea that democratisation would automatically create independent unions. Our argument is also against the notion that the breach between labour and political parties would sustain regardless of the eventualities contemplated in democratisation. For instance, the DPP provided the initial "shot in arm" but independent unions have not grown underneath DPP's dominion. We also argue in favour of an important role that the changing economic landscape has played in shaping labour movement in Taiwan.

Country's IRS has a bearing on political and economic contexts (Sharma, 1996). With political transformation, Taiwan's IRS has changed from a paternalistic system embedded in Confucian values (Chen, 1995) to a pluralistic system (see Cook, 2004; Bronstein, 1997). With democracy getting matured, every independent union, however, was not necessarily treading a common path. Transformation of IRS did not occur overnight and so is the rise of autonomous labour movement in Taiwan. Growth of reasonably independent unions and liberalisation of IRS in Taiwan has been through a process, which is complex than meets the eye. After 2000, democracy started generating labour's expectations to bring autonomous development of unions.

Germane literature suggests that the rise of reasonably independent unions is attributed to three broad factors, which with slightest variations were noticed in our study. First, unions and their traditional allies (namely, political parties) developed interests and strategies concerning their responses to globalisation that were not necessarily coherent (e.g. in India, unions yearned for protectionism, while the government plumped for more openness after 1992). Second, unions in Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Brazil and Bolivia (Foweraker, 2001) have gathered support from grassroots over political elites in turning independent (e.g. the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement grew because of grassroots support). Baccaro *et al.* (2003) and Tattersall (2005) offered interesting perspectives to explain the role of grassroots support to union revitalisation. Third, the failure of politically affiliated unions to persuade their patrons in plugging reforms that curtail labour power has led the workers to dissociate them from affiliated unions. Unions' experiences in few Latin American countries (Cook, 2004) and Iran (Behdad and Nomani, 2011) warrant special attention.

Our paper argues that political liberalisation of Taiwan's IRS gained more momentum when the DPP lost presidency than being in power. Anti-incumbency pushed independent unions to sway opposition's backing during the KMT's rule and not to that extent when the DPP formed government. Unlike its rival, the DPP supposedly supported independent unions to remain liberated from political commitment, not exclaiming allegiance, and forbidding official affiliation while the party was in opposition. The DPP sought neither union's backing nor endorsement. Instead, the party helped KMT-controlled "yellow unions" to renounce their ties with the KMT. DPP espoused neo-liberal labour policies and remained relevant to labour uprising by bringing academia, activists, lawyers and labour leaders on one platform. Although the plan fizzled out,

it succeeded in imprinting party's clear stance on labour independence among intellectuals. Second, the DPP organised the displeased labours to fight for economic nationalism when it was in opposition. Nationalism attracted ethnic Taiwanese although economic slow-down due to "anti-mainland nationalism" was the biggest setback to the DPP. Third, the politically neglected South Taiwan that host more than 70 per cent of working population has drawn DPP's attention. South Taiwan is also strong foothold of the SOE unions. It was traditionally seen as haven for anti-authoritarian forces. Through grassroots mobilisation, the DPP freed several industrial unions in South Taiwan from the KMT's control.

While the DPP should have gained unconditional support from these independent unions, our paper alternatively suggests that anti-incumbency could be factored in justifying the outcome of 2016 Presidential election for average voters and not for labour voters. Labour voters instead of focusing on the divide between economic policies that favour labour over capital were caught to some extent in the issue that encountered the "historical bloc" of the ethnic divide. Although independent unions unreservedly present their demands even when the mandate was at odds with national interests, but on the issue of "independence or unification", they were irresolute. "I support independence over unification, but not sure if can convince my members given that we have no control over its economic repercussion", revealed IU-9. With economic consequences of *taidu* being detrimental to labour, today the independent unions have more or less delinked them from DPP. Nevertheless, per DPP-1 "Party never yearned for adopting independent unions. We wanted autonomous labour movement to mature so that KMT-controlled unions can join autonomous league".

Is DPP's policy where government shall have no control over unions a tactical move or a fallout of the doldrums that party's bilateral relation with mainland created is not clear? Rather than seeing it as DPP's detachment from independent unions, one might see it as the independent unions' growing detestation towards the DPP. KMT-1 claimed so while emphasising on the fallacies in DPP's present political and economic stances. According to him, "Not exerting control on independent unions is different from implementing anti-labour policies. DPP claims to be labour friendly. It relied on urban labour voters in 2016 election. But, to achieve party's bigger agenda of economic nationalism it won't mind piercing its labour friendly veil". Per KMT-2, "Today, whoever is in power will support free market economy no matter how much the labour power gets curtailed. Won't be surprised if DPP end up replicating KMT's labour policies to achieve its agenda of restoring ethnicity far away from mainland's control".

This leaves us at an interesting junction where the DPP continues fighting KMT's authoritarian labour policies to stay in power with the support of autonomous labour voters, yet because of President Tsai's fixation with "one-country-on-each-side", the independent unions have lesser faith in DPP. Working class is at a crossroad. Elderly are unhappy with pension reforms. Employable youth is facing the wrath of depleting export. Apparently, there is a departure of independent unions from the dominion of their political ally – the DPP. Future of autonomous labour movement in Taiwan shall be determined by the readiness of DPP to defuse party's policy differences with native workers' economic interests. The complexity increases with ascendancy of neo-liberal policies fostering informalisation. New generation prefers to be a part of industries that tend to keep unions at bay. A large section chose to meet consumers' demand directly through self-employment, entrepreneurship and small-scale businesses. There is a growing reliance on informal intermediaries for service provision. There is an overwhelming societal individualism that labour hinges on. They choose to resolve their problems by not relying on a defunct body like union. Collectivism is fast losing ground among working population. Consequently, political parties began delinking them from unions. "Whether political parties should have control on unions is no longer a part of popular electoral debate. Parties tend to support labour independence to get an edge during election. Once they sit in Legislative Yuan they do little for true liberalisation of IRS and the same is applicable to DPP as it is to KMT", said IU-1.

To sum up, we theorise that breach between labour and political party is not strictly guided by the policy differences between the two, but could be defined by a combination of economic, political and sociological characteristics. Alignment of politico-economic views takes lead. Unions in communist countries place greater emphasis on national development whereas in democracy the emphasis is on labour's consumption demands. We noticed something more fundamental. Economic interests initially took back seat when the question of ethnic divide impelling nationality turned as DPP's campaign agenda. But when President Tsai moved against "1992 Consensus" by advocating social liberalism, creating Taiwan's own identity far from mainland's dominance, the workers were in dilemma, as most were not prepared to put up with the economic repercussion. "Earlier Chen Sui-Ben's DPP favour disinvestment and privatisation for which labour had to distance from DPP. Today, Tsai's cross-strait policy is causing economic slow-down affecting labour once again. Consequently, unions are turning hostile" shared KMT-2. Last but not the least, the above uncertainties are over and above the general decline in union membership on account of economic liberalisation in Taiwan, which has spring up new avenues of employment in informal sector, created new jobs and forms of work and changed the future of employment relationship, thus making collectivism outmoded for many in Taiwan.

Post-authoritarian political democratisation prompted liberalisation of IRS and shaped autonomous labour movement in Taiwan. After 1987, the political parties' differing ideologies, positions on industrial democracy, and standpoints on nationalism conditioned the changing relationship between labour and the parties. Liberal market economy has played its part too. Although we pondered on the changes that societal values have undergone with time (e.g. from paternalism to pluralism in industrial space and collectivistic work values to strong individualism) and found their effects on labour movement, these factors deserve more scholarly attention. Those who want to go deeper to understand why autonomous labour movement flourishes in one political economy and not in the other may apply theoretical frameworks such as Hall and Soskice's *Varieties of Capitalism*. This may help to understand how labour organisation in different economies (coordinated or liberal) behaves with the advent of political democratisation and grows or dwindles because of the complex relationship that political process shares with changing socio-economic context. Prevailing uncertainty over "one-country-on-each-side" policy is unfavourable for winning the support of labour voters. Therefore, ethnic divide followed by a justified movement in support of President Tsai's DPP would sustain and instill broad nationalist economic agenda in the heart of labour until the time they are hit by its economic consequences. In addition, when country takes a competitive position, the government too "takes quite similar standing" towards union regardless of the party that is in power and its political stance. However, the means of translating the policy into action and parties' ability to fine-tune the policy intricacies to lessen its impact on labour would differ. Therefore, reasonably independent unions have to find its place within this complexity. President Tsai's stance on "cross-strait relations" upheld the international boundaries, and astounded middle-class with Taiwanese hegemony, but the economic consequences failed to withstand the wrath of the working class's fear.

Notes

1. For example, launching labour movement that addresses their specific conditions by seeking leverage from grassroots mobilisation and transnational advocacy networks, discontinuing their practice of focusing on the nation state as the key target of their demands, changing to solidarity networks, and taking up critical stance in relation to the government (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Caraway, 2006; Evans, 2010; McGrath-Champ *et al.*, 2010; Agarwala, 2012, p. 444).
2. Economy have grown by only 1 per cent in 2015, Taiwan is doing worse than other export-oriented Asian economies. Salaries are stagnant and youth unemployment is up.
3. KMT-regime chose methods such as close monitoring of unions, forming KMT's own unions, carrying out partisan politics during union election, "mobilising workers to support KMT-nominated

candidates" (Chen *et al.*, 2003, p. 319), enacting laws to prevent competing unions, controlling collective actions, outlawing "demonstrations and strikes" (Ho, 2014a, b, p. 147), endorsing "one-company-one-union" policy, "subsidizing KMT's own unions to network with their counterparts from anti-communist nations to further party's policies in support of its conflict with China" (Lee, 2000).

4. Non-KMT candidates participated in local direct elections and succeeded.
5. Policies on privatisation and increasing tax rates, failure in controlling unemployment, cost of health insurance and education.
6. For example, privatising SOEs was KMT's brain child and so was the introduction of foreign labourers. KMT opposed workers' demand for representation on the board of directors and so was the party's stand on retirement benefits for government employees.
7. One-China principle/"1992 Consensus" – an agreement reached in Hong Kong in 1992 between intermediaries from either side of the strait that there is one China but that each side has its own interpretation of what one China is.
8. Per Congiu, "labour movement and capital-labour issues in politics appeared to have been edged out by a prevailing concern with Taiwanese identity and the question of independence" (p. 230).
9. "Anti-privatisation struggle got reduced to choice between unification and independence without developing a more fundamentally anti-capitalist and pro-worker position" (Chen and Wong, 2002, pp. 42-43).

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