

Coalition: Newest Political Phenomenon in Taiwan

Taiwan's newly elected Legislative Yuan convened on February 1 to elect its speaker and deputy speaker. Although the incumbents, both members of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party of China) narrowly defeated the candidates nominated by an opposition coalition formed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the New Party (NP), and several rebel KMT legislators, the election signalled that politics in Taiwan have entered a new and exciting phase.

The KMT came out of the December 1995 Legislative Yuan election with 85 seats out of the total of 164; the DPP had 54 seats, the NP 21, and the remaining 4 went to independents. From the numbers alone, it appears that the KMT would have no problem controlling both the legislature and the executive branch, as it can easily command enough votes to get its choice of premier confirmed.

However, when the news broke in late December that the DPP and NP had agreed to form a "sunshine coalition," it surprised the nation and sent a shock wave through the KMT. According to traditional wisdom in Taiwan politics, the main political groupings are organized around the issue of national identity, with the NP advocating unification with mainland China, the DPP supporting Taiwan's independent sovereignty, and the ruling KMT inhabiting the gray area in between. It has been argued all along by most political analysts that there is no common ground between the DPP and the NP because of the overwhelming saliency of the national identity issue. If there was to be any coalition, the analysts predicted, it would have to be between the KMT and the NP or the KMT and the DPP.

Nevertheless, traditional wisdom has proven to be less than one hundred percent wise on earlier occasions. The previous record of cooperation between the two smaller parties on the issues of government efficiency and corruption provides a good example of how these two ideologically opposite groups can work together. This is how Taiwan's "sunshine" laws, such as the Public Office Holders' Asset

Disclosure Law and the Trust Law, were passed by the Legislative Yuan in the face of fierce opposition from Premier Lien Chan. Apparently the opposition parties considered the establishment of a clean and efficient government more important than holding onto their respective ideological stands. Once the DPP and NP find that a specific issue does not have profound ideological implications, that issue becomes fertile ground for an anti-KMT coalition.

News of the DPP-NP coalition has been very well received by the general public, who are tired of seeing the government gradually monopolized by big business and organized crime rings and politicians wasting their time and energy on seemingly fruitless debates while the country is facing a mounting threat from the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

Beijing's hostile reaction to President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States in June 1995 encouraged both the opposition parties to moderate their rigid ideological stands. This has provided more opportunities for them to work together on a broader basis. Realizing that the threat from Beijing is a real danger to Taiwan's independence and aware that the public was afraid of pushing Beijing's patience too far, the DPP leaders began to change their tone on the national identity issue. One after another, the DPP's top leaders announced that a future DPP government would not declare *de jure* independence because Taiwan has already enjoyed *de facto* independence from China for a century. As for the NP, fear of being labeled as the Beijing government's mouthpiece has forced it to denounce Beijing's threat of military action. The party's top leaders even announced that they will *not* consider unification as long as a totalitarian regime is in power on the Chinese mainland. Having softened their ideological stands on the national identity issue thanks to Beijing, therefore, the two parties view the prospect of alliance much more favorably.

However, a coalition between the DPP and the NP would not succeed in defeating the KMT without the support of some rebel KMT legislators. From their voting record in previous Legislative Yuan sessions, we can see that the KMT caucus clearly lacks discipline and cohesiveness. With a clever use of tactics, it would not be too difficult for the opposition to win over a few KMT lawmakers. For instance, in the elections for speaker and deputy speaker, the opposition coalition deliberately avoided nominating a deputy speaker. Consequently, a KMT legislator was willing to fill the vacancy and at least four others were willing to support the maverick candidate. To many KMT legislators, rebelling against their own party is the

only way they can gain a higher profile.

By the same token, the opposition coalition has revealed that it intends to use ministerial positions to lure some distinguished KMT legislators away from voting for Premier Lien Chan's reconfirmation, which took place on February 23. Although the attempt by the opposition coalition failed and Lien was confirmed, the KMT will be put to another test in May when the newly elected president assumes office. If it turns out, as widely believed, that President Lee is re-elected and his running mate Lien elected as the vice president in the March election, a new premier must be nominated when Lien takes the new post. However, if the new KMT nominee fails to secure a Legislative Yuan confirmation in May, President Lee will be forced to nominate a candidate for premier who is acceptable to the opposition coalition with the understanding that the new premier, after confirmation, will form a coalition government. Because if President Lee's choice of premier failed to pass the Legislative Yuan confirmation, Lien would be forced to continue in office once again, and that would cause a constitutional crisis. As premier, Lien is responsible to the legislature and must appear before it for interpellation, whereas as vice president, he cannot be interpellated by legislators. There is simply no way out of this impasse.

If President Lee did choose a candidate for premier presented to him by the opposition coalition, Lee's power would be significantly curtailed, regardless of how many votes he received in the presidential election. A premier responsible to the Legislative Yuan and chosen by a coalition of opposition legislators would not be likely to respond to the demands of the president. And if the newly elected president decided to exert his power over the Executive Yuan, one might see a repetition of the political chaos that broke out in February 1990 when the president and the premier came into conflict.

Politics in Taiwan has entered an entirely new stage, as the ruling KMT's political power is gradually eroded by the opposition. The politics of coalition-building in the national legislature will create a lot of uncertainty for Taiwan in the years ahead. Many people are unaccustomed to uncertainty, but it is, nevertheless, the essence of democracy. After all, who would choose to go back to the rigid and predetermined system of the authoritarian era after all these years of freedom and democracy?

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