

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy.*** By SHELLEY RIGGER. New York and London: Routledge, October 1999. 256 pages. Cloth: US\$100.00; Paper: US\$45.95; ISBN: 041517208X.

Shelley Rigger's book presents the straightforward but enlightening thesis that Taiwan's local elections, conducted continuously since the colonial days, are the key to the island's peaceful democratization beginning in the late 1980s. Offering a detailed account of the unfolding of Taiwan's electoral history and its consequences, this book is well researched and convincingly argued, and will certainly be a welcome contribution to both the literature of comparative politics and readers unfamiliar with the island.

Writing a book in English about Taiwanese politics, however, may need some justification, given Taiwan's small population size and limited geopolitical importance. In fact, the position of Taiwan in comparative politics may be as inconspicuous as her international status. Fortunately, political science nowadays is not only divided along regional boundaries, but also grouped together by a shared desire to build general theories through empirical studies. A single case—the smallest N that one can imagine—is theoretically useful insofar as it is genuinely unique. A case enjoys this status only if it is different from the others (whereas the others are alike). Only with this pattern can we isolate the sources of the case's uniqueness.

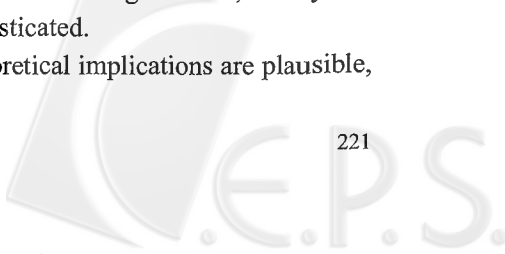
This approach is exactly how the author designs her analysis. The book begins by suggesting that Taiwan's transition to democracy has been relatively smooth by world standards, and that the major cause—the early opening of local elections—is also exceptional. The comparativists will be happy to find that the author links these phenomena with a theoretical mechanism. She applies extensively Bolivar Lamounier's theory of

"opening through elections," which argues that an authoritarian regime needs elections to strength its legitimacy and that the electoral process produces the momentum for more open competitions. Because the dynamic is endogenous to the elections, the process of political opening is managed along a "mobile horizon": the reformers move forward at a controlled pace after each step is proven safe.

This model, according to the author, fits Taiwan well. The Kuomintang (KMT, or the Nationalist Party, 國民黨)—Taiwan's former authoritarian party—immigrated to the island after World War II but found local elections already a routine. The KMT quickly learned to ensconce its local agents through these elections, and as a result fortified the party's legitimacy both domestically and internationally. As Taiwan's diplomatic isolation increased, the KMT found electoral opening a handy survival kit, especially when the peculiar single nontransferable vote under multi-member district (SNTV, or what the author calls SVM) guaranteed the party enormous seat bonuses. As the regime became more open, the direct presidential election of 1996 was simply an unavoidable consequence.

Democratization and electoral process—the dependent and independent variables of this study—are observable only as time-series data, so the organization of this book has to be diachronic. Indeed, the author has tried her best to make a historical narrative analytical, and the product is an impressive one. Chapters two to seven deal respectively with the origin of Taiwan's electoral system, the KMT's party-state authoritarianism, electoral mobilization in the pre-reform era, political reform under Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國), the election of 1989, and the years under Lee Teng-hui (李登輝). Each chapter gives an explanation of how the electoral system converted political forces into legislative seats, and how the authoritarian party reflected on the electoral results before moving forward. Charts and figures are used efficiently to reveal the impacts of the elections and the strategies political parties chose. The chapters also portray in detail the milestone events in the historical process, indicating that the author has a good grasp of Taiwan's social changes. The writing is fluent, the style is reader-friendly, and the message is sophisticated.

The extent to which the book's theoretical implications are plausible,



however, depends on how well the peculiarity of the Taiwanese case is expounded. The author argues that the KMT was ideologically committed to democracy, and must consider opening the electoral competition to alleviate the pressures from diplomatic setbacks and rising opposition forces. The opposition candidates were able to garner popular support because they were experienced campaigners—thanks to the early opened local elections. The author's explanations are mostly accurate. The problem is not whether they explain Taiwan, however, but why they do not explain other cases.

Most authoritarian regimes face incessant survival crises, and the KMT is certainly not the only governing party upholding democracy as a founding principle. The ideological factor also cannot explain why the KMT, founded in the early twentieth century, only realized its democratic commitment half a century later on a remote island. To be sure, the early opening of local elections is something that makes Taiwan distinctive. However, the real puzzle is why the KMT carried on a colonial legacy that the party had little experience with, especially since the Chiang regime had the power to change the political structure. What really matters is not the early existence of local elections, for other crumbled democracies could boast such competitions as well, but its persistent evolution. That elections can automatically generate a "decompression" effect that forces authoritarian parties to liberalize may also sound too idealistic to be real.

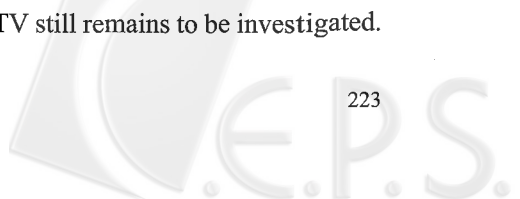
The author could counter these questions in two ways. First, she could claim that the legitimacy crises that challenged the KMT were of an unprecedented scale, which made democratic opening a safer choice. Second and more important, the KMT was indeed able to control the pace of liberalization, and thus felt safe. The secret, according to the author, lies in the peculiar system of SNTV (SVMM), which gives the party a couple of advantages. One is that the system requires the political parties both to divide their votes as evenly as possible and to help their candidates secure the vote through clientelist networks. With its superior organizational capacity, the KMT could easily beat the opposition by fulfilling these tasks. Second, SNTV grants great seat bonuses to large parties, such as the KMT. As a result, the Nationalist Party improved its domestic and international images through this electoral opening, without fear of losing power in the

resulting competition. Moreover, the electoral system helped contain the local factions inside the KMT, and thus channeled grass-roots conflict into support for the party. Those are the mechanisms by which the KMT's "mobilizational authoritarianism" worked, and how the regime fostered the "opening through elections."

These are compelling arguments. Because SNTV is unique, we have undeniably spotted the clue to explaining Taiwan's unusual experience of democratization. However, a critical question still remains to be answered: Why SNTV? Obviously, the KMT decided to preserve the system not because of the seat bonuses the party could earn. SNTV, when used under multi-member districts, is indeed "semi-proportional." That is, large seat bonus for a large party is an exceptional case if the small parties also nominate optimally and divide their vote evenly. For the KMT to maximize its seat share, the most effective means should be the single-member district system, or other rules that institutionally protect a large party.

It is reasonable to surmise that the electoral system facilitated Taiwan's democratic opening not so much by over-representing the KMT as by the electoral certainty the system created. The author points out convincingly that the greatest obstacle to democracy is the uncertainty it imposes on the authoritarian party. To the KMT, the single-member district system is not an attractive alternative simply because this arrangement puts all political fortunes in a single basket. In Taiwan's single-seat executive elections, for example, the KMT is more likely to suffer from an unstable vote swing and surrender the office to the opposition. Under SNTV, in contrast, a party's vote share does not change much between elections and the legislative seats it can garner are also quite predictable. The authoritarian party thus finds making accurate calculations to be easier under SNTV, and determines the degree to which the electoral competition should be upgraded. Moreover, SNTV is probably the most likely source of the KMT's prolonged legislative dominance after the democratic opening.

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the KMT had foreseen these outcomes when the party first arrived in Taiwan. The KMT certainly felt the necessity to use limited elections to incorporate the local elite, but whether the party fully understood the effects of SNTV still remains to be investigated.



Most likely, this system persists because it is evolutionarily survivable: this arrangement matches the KMT's clientelist network and the status quo local factions, and the variation of each electoral outcome is small enough to keep the party from worrying about the loss of seats. This evolutionary stability also explains why more than four decades were required for Taiwan's electoral competition to be gradually expanded until the presidential election was opened. If electoral opening is a major cause of Taiwan's democratization, the peacefulness of the latter can also be accounted by the gradualness of the former.

In any case, this book accurately identified the significant impacts of electoral process—the institutional dimension in particular—on Taiwan's political transformation, although other conditions could also be considered. Most noteworthy is Taiwan's national identity problem and sub-ethnic politics. For instance, the KMT's cross-ethnic composition and its early Taiwanization policy not only made the party a pivot in the transitioning process, but also gave Lee Teng-hui the strategic motivation to cultivate an opposition party that helped him subjugate the enemies in the party. Furthermore, the opposition candidates were able to turn the local elections into national plebiscites because national identity has been a dominant issue. As shown in the experiences of many young democracies, the lack of mobilizable issues can significantly hinder the growth of opposition forces.

Democratic opening must be a dynamic process involving the challenger and the incumbent. This book does a wonderful job demonstrating that Taiwan's relatively smooth democratization is due to the fact that the two opposing forces met in the electoral arena long before the regime was opened for fair elections. However, the author has also chosen a task that is intrinsically difficult to accomplish: to derive generally applicable propositions from a case that is distinguished by its peculiarity.

**JIH-WEN LIN (林繼文)**

Associate Research Fellow  
Institute of Political Science  
Academia Sinica  
Taipei  
E-mail: <jw@sinica.edu.tw>

