Is Taiwanese Society Intensely Politicized?

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In this interesting and informative book, *Politicized Society: The Long Shadow of Taiwan's One-party Legacy*, Mikael Mattlin argues that Taiwanese society, compared to its counterparts in established European democracies, is intensely politicized.

Mattlin claims that Taiwan's high degree of politicization stems from a combination of five structural features: transition interregnum, semipresidentialism, asymmetric integration, the patronage state, and nested pyramid structures facilitating political mobilization. Some of these are formal institutions and some informal political structures, but in Mattlin's view, it is not the institutional arrangements that lie at the root of Taiwan's politicization. Therefore, instead of focusing on formal institutions, he emphasizes the importance of informal political structures, arguing that political mobilization, particularly in the form of *zaoshi* (造勢), or mass rallies, plays the most important role in promoting an intensely politicized society in Taiwan.

Finally, Mattlin concludes that "at the height of Taiwan's politicization . . . everything was politics, with large parts of the population regularly taking part in political mass actions and the political battle also invading workplaces and even family affairs" (p. 242).

Mattlin's book is well organized and allows the reader to explore an interesting aspect of Taiwan's newly formed democracy. His efforts to systematically analyze how and why Taiwan has become a politicized

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society are praiseworthy. However, while this book contains important information and insights, I find that Mattlin's argument is not persuasive enough to convince the reader that Taiwanese society is as politicized as he claims.

In my view, the politicization issue should be addressed at two different levels—the elite and the mass—and analyzed on an empirical basis. In my own work on politicization at the elite level, I have looked at roll-call votes in the third to the sixth sessions of the Legislative Yuan (1996-2008).[1] I found that the proportion of "party votes" increased dramatically over that period, indicating that confrontation between the two major parties became more intense after the first transfer of power in 2000.[2] When I looked at roll-call votes on particular issue areas, such as relations with China, political reform, social welfare, the economy, environmental issues, and so on,[3] I found a high degree of party segregation on all of them, demonstrating that party divisions have intensified across the board. In short, Taiwan's political elites have indeed become intensely politicized.

It is, however, inappropriate to infer that Taiwanese society as a whole is intensely politicized simply because there is a high degree of politicization among Taiwan's politicians. The question whether there is intense political polarization in society as a whole can only be answered by recourse to empirical evidence at the level of both the elite and the general public.

To be fair, Mattlin does emphasize the important role that ordinary citizens play in heightened politicization. On page 3, Mattlin offers the following definition: "with regard to people, 'politicized' then refers to being interested and involved in politics, being politically motivated or adept in the ways of the politician." On this basis, he draws the conclusion that the Taiwanese public is highly politicized because of their enthusiastic in-

[1]Hung-chung Wang, "A Blue-Green Divide? Elite and Mass Partisan Dynamics in Taiwan" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of New Orleans, 2010).

[2]A "party vote" refers to a roll-call vote in which a majority of members of one party vote against a majority of the opposing party.

[3]Wang, "A Blue-Green Divide?"

volvement in campaign activities, such as mass rallies.

However, the author does not offer much convincing empirical evidence to support this observation. In order to investigate whether ordinary Taiwanese citizens are intensely politicized or not, it is necessary to use data from public opinion polls to compare political involvement in Taiwan with, say, that in the United States.

The United States is a well-established democracy, and U.S. citizens, in general, are perceived to be indifferent to politics. However, 9 percent of respondents in the American National Election Studies (ANES) poll[4] said that they had attended one or more political meetings during the 2008 presidential election campaign. This is more than the 7.2 percent of respondents of a similar poll in Taiwan (Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study, 2005-2008[IV]: the Survey of Presidential Election in 2008, hereafter TEDS 2008P)[5] who were recorded as having taken part in a political meeting during Taiwan's presidential election the same year. Four percent of respondents said they had attended a meeting spontaneously, while 3.2 percent had been invited to attend, demonstrating that few Taiwanese have been involved in *zaoshi* activity, and that Taiwanese voters are generally less willing to get involved in politics than their counterparts in the United States.

Moreover, according to the ANES survey, as many as 13 percent of U.S. citizens made campaign donations to candidates, while according to TEDS 2008P, only 0.7 percent of Taiwanese made political donations during the 2008 presidential election campaign. This is further proof that Taiwanese are not as enthusiastically involved in politics as Mattlin suggests.

Regarding levels of politicization, 68.4 percent of TEDS 2008P respondents said they either "rarely" or "never" discuss politics and elections with others, and only 28.7 percent were "very concerned" about the

[4]American National Election Studies (ANES), http://electionstudies.org/index.htm (accessed December 8, 2011).

[5]Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study (TEDS), http://www.tedsnet.org/cubekm2/front/bin/home.phtml (accessed December 8, 2011).

outcome of the 2008 presidential election. Furthermore, 75.8 percent of Taiwanese said they either paid "no attention at all" or gave "less than thirty minutes" to election news in the newspapers.

Contrary to Mattlin's observations, individual-level survey data show that the Taiwanese public is neither particularly interested in politics nor motivated to take part in campaign activities. Therefore, the assertion that Taiwan is an intensely politicized society is not correct when we include ordinary citizens' political participation in the analysis.

In reality, only a few Taiwanese are interested in the *zaoshi* type of political activity, and the impression of a high degree of politicization might simply be a product of media exaggeration. In other words, if we focus our attention on the political elite and the minority who regularly attend political rallies, rather than the general public who give scant regard to politics, we might gain the impression that Taiwanese society is highly politicized. In short, Taiwan is not as intensely politicized as Mattlin claims in his book.

Although I do not totally agree with the author's assertions, this book, in my opinion, is still worthy of recommendation as it deals with an important and interesting topic and contains an abundance of information about political development in modern Taiwan. I would recommend it to students of political science and anyone interested in Taiwanese politics, as it offers readers a clear picture of how politics has affected the lives of the Taiwanese public since World War II.