

## *Local Elections and Their Implications to the Problems of Appointed Village and Township Heads*

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In recent local elections the green camp again made small gains. While the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) keeps reiterating that the local political landscape remains unchanged, the tactics of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to gradually establish a foothold at the grassroots level has begun to pay off. Under the forceful leadership of Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP grabbed four seats of 14 seats at stake in elections for irrigation association directorships. The DPP has also given out the slogan that it wants to win more than 1,000 seats islandwide at the grassroots level. Judging from the call for self-criticism that KMT Secretary-General King Pu-tsung issued, the DPP's advance clearly feels like a thorn in the KMT's flesh.

With the five municipal elections drawing closer, the DPP has already spread the word that it will nominate a high number of candidates in elections for village and neighborhood chiefs. No matter whether the DPP wins or loses, its campaign will affect the KMT's factional power system, which has already begun to crumble at the grassroots level. The KMT has only itself to blame for finding itself in such a sorry state. President Ma Ying-jeou is hostile toward the factions but also wants to use them. As a result he sometimes treats them as buddies and sometimes turns against them. Actually some politicians have factions and factions

per se are not a bad thing. They have become such an evil only because the KMT has granted them the right to monopolize the local economy since a long time ago. Despite being the chief culprit, the KMT wants to rake up the muck, yet doesn't want to soil its hands. Not keeping one's word when mixing with the mob is a great taboo. So it should not come as a surprise that the grassroots lash back at Ma.

But winning elections is one thing, governing the local government is another. Taiwan currently faces a disintegration of local self government. In the urban areas, where 60% of the population lives and local elections will no longer be held, administrative efficiency will rise as a result. But in the rural areas, where 40% of the population lives and local elections will continue, we will continue to face the longstanding problem of budget fragmentation, while the township offices lack money. As efficiency rises here and declines there, the gap between first-class and second-class citizens will widen with regard to urban governance.

Facing this problem the DPP has long advocated abolishing elections for village and township heads, which happens to match the goal of making government more efficient. But the KMT has long opposed the idea that village and township heads are appointed by the government instead of being elected, ostensibly for the sake of

local self government, yet actually because of the elections. In these small-scale election campaigns the KMT can clinch victory by bankrolling local factions and buying votes. Moreover, in counties and county-level cities where the KMT has lost power, it can still directly distribute funds to KMT village and township heads as administrative bonuses. Thinking things through, it seems that citizens' interests in Taipei City have not really been affected, although district head elections have not been held for many years. The village and township offices are plagued by many problems. Their own revenue and personnel is insufficient. If it wasn't for feedback funds that the government pays for major public facilities in the area, many township offices would not even be able to pay salaries.

Furthermore, since every village and township representative has the right to propose small-scale construction projects, the budget becomes severely fragmented. It is already a big enough problem that village and township offices are not able to pay their employees' salaries. But on top of that they also need to pay for construction projects proposed by local representatives. Although budget proposals are becoming more and more transparent, because they pertain to government procurement standards, the fragmented expenditures still pose a heavy burden on local finances. Of course it is very important that agricultural roads in remote areas are asphalted and equipped with

roadside reflectors, but why shouldn't county governments be able to plan such projects given Taiwan's quite small administrative scope? In the future the administration of the five metropolises will reflect such expectations. If their governments truly become more efficient, then it would be worth making efforts in the direction of appointing the village and township heads across Taiwan to prevent creating second-class citizens.

The DPP's performance in grassroots elections is gradually improving. But the party will not give up its longstanding stance that urban governance should be rationalized and become more efficient for the sake of seizing control of a number of cash-strapped village and township offices. Its advocacy of appointing local officials does not clash with continued participation in grassroots elections. After all if the existing bad system cannot be abolished for the time being, it is still better to encourage somewhat better talent to participate in it, so that it can be steered into a slightly better direction. Far more important than winning grassroots elections is actually the redrawing of Taiwan's administrative boundaries and efficient governance. **B**