

## *An Analysis of the Upcoming Five Cities Elections*

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Less than seventy days remain until Taiwan's five new special municipalities elect new mayors and city councils in December. Overall the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) seems to have the upper hand in the campaign over the Kuomintang (KMT). Not only that the DPP seems set for victory in the southern cities of Kaohsiung and Tainan, even in Taipei City, Sinbei City, and Taichung City, where prospects for the DPP were originally not good, the DPP candidates are gaining ground. Since May when both parties officially nominated their mayoral candidates, the KMT candidates' lead in voter support has been narrowing considerably. The election situation has changed most dramatically in Taipei City where support for incumbent Mayor Hau Lung-bin has plummeted due to allegedly corruption in the city government in connection with the overpricing of an expressway overpass and bids for the International Flora Exhibition. Presently Hau, originally leading, has already fallen behind his challenger, former DPP premier Su Tseng-chang.

First judging from the overall situation the DPP is leading at the moment. This is

due largely to better political track record and individual personalities of its two candidates. One of the major reasons is that the performance of the ruling party at the central government level plays an increasingly important role in Taiwan's islandwide elections. In other words the performance of the central government organs exerts growing influence on local region-wide elections. This trend became actually already apparent in the three-in-one (township, city, county) elections of 2005 when the DPP, then Taiwan's ruling party, lost more than half of the localities that it had previously ruled, due to its dismal performance. And when the DPP central government failed to improve voter satisfaction, it suffered a landslide defeat in the 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections. On top of losing central government power, the DPP's seats in the legislature shrank to less than one quarter, bringing the party to the brink of a breakup. The DPP regained a stable footing only after winning several local elections last year.

A similar scenario now befalls the KMT. The party has suffered a string of defeats ranging from several legislative by-elections last year and this year to last year's

elections for county magistrates and city mayors. It even lost for the first time control of traditional strongholds such as Taitung County. The latest Local Leader Approval Survey by Commonwealth Magazine also shows that Taiwanese voter sentiment is rapidly changing. Support for the green camp is on the rise, while blue camp approval is on the skids. While the ranking of the eight DPP-ruled cities and counties improved across the board, local executives from the DPP even claimed the six top spots. In contrast the ranking of the KMT-ruled localities markedly declined. KMT-ruled counties and cities do not only occupy the six bottom spots, but the entire lower half of the list from rank 14 downward. Only Jiayi City, Changhua County and Lienchiang County made it into the Top Ten. Even popular KMT figures with celebrity status such as Miaoli County chief Liu Cheng-hung and Taichung City mayor Jason Hu sank to numbers 15 and lower. These survey results and the low support rates that the government of President Ma Ying-jeou enjoys in public opinion polls show that the KMT needs to take a more serious and humble attitude toward facing and examining voter sentiment. It must also mobilize the entire party pulling out all the stops to fight the campaign for the five cities elections, or else it won't stand a chance of staging a turnaround.

Furthermore, the upcoming elections have another special feature: while the results of public opinion polls conducted by different pollsters somewhat differ, they have one point in common, namely that a very high share of survey respondents reveal their political stance. This means that the majority of people eligible to vote in the five cities elections have early on committed themselves to a certain candidate and have made up their minds as to whom they will support on voting day in December. That such a high ratio of voters are expressing their political stance implies that the upcoming five cities elections hinge on voters' sympathy for a certain candidate, while fewer base their voting decision on a candidate's performance in the election campaign or on whether his policies resonate with the electorate. More voters decide to support a candidate because of his personal character, because he has gained the image of a capable politician over the years, or because of his party affiliation. The fact that so many voters have made up their minds months ahead of the vote therefore shows that the two parties' current strength or weakness is mainly owed to continued momentum that gathered much earlier. Clearly the situation looks unfavorable for the KMT.

Still Taiwan's political situation is changing quickly. Voter sentiment can change

overnight, while during electioneering the situation is so fickle that the trend even swings several times in a day. The currently leading parties and candidates must not take it for granted that they will emerge as the ultimate winners. If we factor in that voter enthusiasm for the upcoming elections varies from place to place and that experts differ widely over predicted voter turnout, while also taking into account the two parties' loyal core support, the most important factors influencing the upcoming elections on top of voter turnout will likely be middle of the road voters.

Therefore, while the final red-hot phase of the five city elections has just started, the two parties won't know until the very last moment who has won and who has lost. Neither party is in the position to sit back and take this race lightly. **BT**