

After the Five-Cities Elections: Taiwan's Changed Political Landscape

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In the just concluded mayoral elections in Taiwan's five major metropolises, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) retained control in the three cities that it ruled originally. Yet overall the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) obtained 400,000 votes more than the KMT, almost winning an absolute majority of the public vote and widening its lead over the KMT to more than 5%. If local elections held at the county and municipal level late last year are included, in which the DPP's total share of the vote lagged 2% behind the KMT, we could say that the DPP's share of the total vote in elections of local executives in single-seat constituencies exceeds that of the KMT.

For the opposition DPP the election outcome constitutes a considerable success. It also presages how the structure of the political landscape will look like in future presidential elections. Still, the shooting attack on Sean Lien, the son of KMT heavyweight Lien Chan, on the eve of voting day influenced voters so that the DPP won only two of the five mayoral seats at stake, failing against wide expectations to win more cities, whereas the KMT claimed victory for retaining its three mayoral seats. Against this backdrop

several important structural changes have been overlooked. The following analysis focuses on the waxing and waning of the blue (KMT) and green (DPP) political camps:

Clock Turned Back to 2004

Although the five cities elections were not nationwide elections like legislative or presidential elections, they provide clues for observing changes in the relative strength of the blue and green political camps, because the local executives were elected in single seat constituencies and in one-on-one races between the respective KMT and DPP candidates, except for Kaohsiung which saw a three-way race. As a result the geographical distribution of the vote shows landslide DPP victories in Kaohsiung and Tainan, nearly a KMT-DPP draw in Taichung, and a minor DPP defeat in the two northern municipalities of Taipei and Xinbei City. This scenario is reminiscent of Chen Shui-bian's re-election in 2004. Back then the DPP's election strategy was scoring victory in central Taiwan to use votes won in the south to make up for losses in the greater Taipei area. The reasoning was that Chen stood a chance of winning a

narrow victory in the presidential race, if he could manage a tie in central Taiwan.

In comparison the vote distribution in the five cities elections was quite similar. Particularly in Taichung, where we had a combined election in Taichung City and Taichung County this time, the scenario was exactly the same as in the 2004 presidential election, when Chen managed a tie by balancing his minor loss in Taichung City with a minor victory in Taichung County. This tie in central Taiwan also presaged Chen's narrow victory over the Lien-Soong ticket overall.

Blue-green competition after the change of the ruling party in 2000 has apparently returned to the scenario of 2004. Although the structure of Taiwan's political map has slightly changed, the shooting of Sean Lien has virtually restored its original state. This has several implications: First, the DPP, which has been an opposition party for two years now, suffered a major defeat in the last presidential election and legislative elections, shrinking to a core voter support of 40%. But the five cities elections showed that the DPP has already bounced back to the highest level of support that it enjoyed as a ruling party. Following Chen's successful re-election in 2004, it was also the second time since the party's founding in 1986 that the DPP won an absolute majority of the popular vote.

Second, there is obviously room for repeating the strategy of making central Taiwan the decisive battle ground in the next election. Let's take as example the race between DPP candidate Su Jia-chyuan and incumbent KMT Mayor Jason Hu in Taichung. One had parachuted into the city six months ago, while the other had served as its mayor for nine years. Hu even claimed that his political charisma by far exceeded that of President Ma Ying-jeou, yet he only managed to keep his post thanks to the Sean Lien shooting incident. This means that in the presidential election in 2012 the pan-blue camp will not only face an uphill battle in the south, but also a precarious situation in central Taiwan. As long as Su continues to cultivate the greater Taichung constituency, its political "greening" can be expected.

However, this also means that the past electoral structure still affects the DPP's expansion strategy. The shooting incident in particular polarized the electorate so that the blue-green divide was consolidated again. I think for the DPP this was the strongest blow. Originally the DPP hoped if DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen herself ran in Xinbei City, blue-green core voter support would shift thanks to her new style election campaign and moderate, reasonable image. The ballot structure indicates that these have

had an effect, yet failed to cause as much of a shift as originally anticipated. This shows that on the whole the DPP still needs to become more persuasive when appealing to the public.

Deeper Green in South, Faded Blue in North

The South might be green and the North might be blue. Yet where the DPP lost, it lost to the KMT with a margin of less than 5%, except for Taipei. Where it won, it won by a wide margin of more than 10%. This means that the South has become greener, whereas the North did not correspondingly turn bluer. In other words, the shift in Taiwan's political landscape is proceeding from the south to the north along the latitude lines. Presently it seems the DPP has almost turned the tables as far northward as Taichung, in a trend that could be interpreted in various ways:

First, the election outcome does not mean that there is no room for Tsai's course in the two northern metropolises, but that it will have lagged effects. The election showed that the gap in voter support between the blue and green camps has narrowed, but that the originally anticipated political landslide did not take place. As the DPP studies the election outcome, its most important task will probably be figuring out how to let the lagged effects

materialize in 2012, uninhibited by KMT rule in Taipei and Xinbei City.

Second, Taichung's Hu is always considered as a political star with greater charisma than Ma. In the race with Su this time Hu was completely outshone. The election results in particular debunked the myth of Hu's previous high opinion poll ratings. This shows that the effects of the DPP's present course and political leadership have not yet fully played out. And given that their marginal benefit is still increasing, the expected "greening" of Taichung is merely a matter of time. Therefore Ma is not guaranteed victory in central Taiwan in 2012. **BT**