

The Five-Cities Elections and Cross-strait Ties

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Five-Cities Election Seen as Midterm Verdict on President Ma

On November 27, 2010, nearly sixty percent of Taiwan's eligible voters will go to the polls in local elections in the four newly merged and upgraded metropolitan areas of Kaohsiung, Tainan, Taichung, Xinbei City (formerly Taipei County) as well as Taipei. Since there will be no other elections before the next presidential election in 2012, the five cities election is widely seen as its prelude. No one dares to take the five cities elections lightly, particularly because Ma has faced a string of defeats since taking power, be it in legislative by-elections or county and municipal elections.

Aside from being seen as a precursor to the 2012 presidential campaign, the outcome of the five cities election will not affect the distribution of power at the level of central government. But it will influence the relationship between the ruling and the opposition parties as well as the rise and fall of political factions within the individual parties. So far the Ma government's cross-strait policy remains highly controversial. Not only Beijing is likely to adjust its policy toward Taiwan based on the outcome of

the five cities elections. The corresponding strengthening or weakening of Taiwan's two major political forces – the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – will also affect the cross-strait policy of the Ma government.

Taiwan's Internal Logic of Power

The election outcome could serve as an indicator for the rise and fall of certain political parties. Should the KMT be able to defend its rule in Taipei, Xinbei City and Taichung and the DPP remain in power in Tainan and Kaohsiung, the vast majority of observers would term this a KMT victory even if the DPP surpassed the KMT in terms of total share of votes gained. Ma government would interpret such a result as a vote of confidence in the government and Ma's power within the KMT would be consolidated as a result. On the other hand DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (who runs for mayor of Xinbei City) would likely face pressure to step down from her post to take responsibility for the election defeat.

However, should the DPP win three or even four metropolitan areas, this would be regarded as a vote of no-confidence in the

policies that the Ma government pursued over the past two years. As a result the legitimacy of these policies and of further pursuing them would be greatly eroded, and Ma would see his power within the KMT challenged. The present cooperation between the KMT and KMT splinter groups, New Party and People First Party (PFP), could also collapse. The Ma critics within the KMT, who were itching for action in the first place, will likely strike while the iron is hot.

Beijing's Concerns and Possible Reactions

As far as Beijing is concerned, the five cities elections will influence policy toward Taiwan because the election outcome will impact the respective political strength of the KMT and DPP. Over the past two years Beijing's strategy was to use the platform between the Chinese Communist Party and the KMT to control the KMT, thus influencing Taiwan's future direction through the KMT. Consequently Beijing and the KMT are going through thick and thin together. Beijing fears that, should the KMT lose government power in 2012, the gains made in its Taiwan policy between 2008 and 2012 will be rolled back by the DPP.

Should the KMT retain control in three of the five cities the government in Beijing will

continue to grant Taiwan economic favors, but demand that the Ma government will continue to honor the one China principle on the political front. However, based on the same logic, Beijing might show two different reactions in the event of a DPP victory.

Concerned that the Ma government could be weakened further in the run up to the 2012 presidential election, Beijing might adopt a softer policy toward Taiwan such as allowing more Chinese tourists to visit, or granting Taiwan more opportunities to appear on the international stage as long as such moves do not violate the one China principle. It might relocate the missiles pointed at Taiwan from its coasts further inland to demonstrate goodwill or allow countries that maintain good relations with China to negotiate free trade agreements with Taiwan. Such moves would strengthen Ma ahead of the presidential campaign and increase his chances of winning re-election.

But Beijing might also think that Ma's star is waning and that it better use his remaining time in power to exert pressure on him to drive in several pillars that make unification an accomplished fact that the DPP, once back in power, cannot reverse. At the same time it will meddle with the KMT's internal power struggle to ensure that the future KMT leader is a yes-man who obeys Beijing. Furthermore Beijing will make greater efforts to interact

with the various DPP factions to gain more influence over the DPP's China policy. Beijing will probably also intensify dialogue with Washington over the Taiwan Strait issue to prevent being caught on the wrong foot should it want to revive its policy of "joining hands with the KMT to contain the DPP and using the United States to contain Taiwan," which was in place between 2003 and 2008.

Will Ma Step on the Cross-strait Brakes After an Election Defeat?

People generally believe that if the KMT loses the five cities elections Ma will likely step on the brakes regarding cross-strait policy to prevent undermining his re-election bid. But Ma himself believes that his major political achievements over the past two years were in the field of cross-strait relations. Stepping on the brakes would then not only indicate that Ma is aware that something is wrong with his cross-strait policies, he would also lose the best weapon for highlighting his political track record when running for re-election. In past setbacks such as the county and municipal elections or the legislative by-elections Ma blamed the defeats on the KMT being not hard-line enough. His efforts to intensify blue-green confrontation before this election also faithfully adhere to his strategy of "returning to our traditional support base,

mobilizing deep-blue voters." Therefore he might choose to speed up cross-strait rapprochement, thus raising confrontation between the blue and green camps over national identity and cross-strait relations.

Although the five cities election is not an election at the central government level and will not change the seat distribution in the legislature, the election outcome will cause a shift between the blue and green political camps. It is widely expected that the Ma government will reshuffle the cabinet after the elections to forge a combative team for the re-election struggle. A key factor for cross-strait development after the five cities election will be how China and the Ma government interpret the election outcome and how they respond to it. Should the KMT successfully defend three of the five cities, the situation is not expected to change very much. But if the KMT wins only two cities or less, everything is possible ranging from China opting for a soft-line or a hard-line approach toward Taiwan, and the Ma government stepping on the brakes or on the gas pedal in cross-strait rapprochement. Any of these possible combinations could result in quite drastic changes. **BT**