

## *The DPP Nomination Process and Its Political Impact*

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In a democracy the most important function of political parties aside from formulating and advocating policy is nominating candidates to participate in elections and win the ballot to gain government power. Therefore the parties' nomination systems keep changing with election trends. The nomination process is not carved in stone nor are so-called democratic principles applied to primaries, because no matter how well-intended and idealistic a primary election system is, nothing will come of it, if it doesn't produce candidates who can win.

The primary system of a political party should therefore be judged based on the electoral success of the candidates that it produces and on whether it can spread the party's message among the electorate and build party unity. Of course, such standards smack of "consequentialism," meaning that whatever primary system can produce winning candidates is a good one. This again leads to two other problems. First, how can it be ensured that the strongest candidates join the race? Second, how can internal divisions be avoided that could damage the party's image?

Based on these two indicators (strong

candidates and party unity) the recent resignation of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Secretary-General King Pu-tsung and his replacement by (former Presidential Office Secretary-General) Liao Liao-yi is actually also a preparatory move for the party's presidential primary. President Ma Ying-jeou has become a strong candidate who is unchallenged within the party, because the KMT managed to remain in power in three of five major cities in recent mayoral elections. But certain primary election processes could still provide an opportunity for Ma critics within the party to challenge his candidacy. The main mission of Liao in taking control of the party headquarters is to diffuse the discontent of these forces.

Similarly the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) design of an island-wide public opinion poll for its presidential primary is disputed within the party. Although there has all along been controversy over the value of DPP party member participation in opinion polls or demands that the opinions of pan-green supporters should be given greater weight in them, either approach must be weighed based on its chances of leading to an election win. Particularly because Taiwan

faces a critical election in 2012, which will determine whether independence will still have some room on Taiwan's political development agenda.

It's of course a different story if the objective of a presidential election is not victory, but a more long-term goal such as promoting certain political ideologies or balancing the interests of different factions within the party. In 1964 the U.S. Republican Party nominated Senator Barry Goldwater, a representative of the reactionary right, as presidential candidate. His campaign laid the foundations for a lasting conservative swing in the United States. Although Goldwater lost in a landslide, his campaign set a conservative agenda for generations to come.

However, if we look at the relative strength of the blue (KMT) and green (DPP) political camps in Taiwan, the likelihood of another change in the ruling party cannot be ruled out at all. That the proposed nationwide poll smoothly passed the DPP Central Executive Committee and its National Congress, and that even candidates for legislator-at-large will be picked by a "nomination committee" in a complete reversal of past practice, does not only symbolize a consolidation of DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen's leadership position, but also shows that the DPP has a very strong will to

win. Since the president and single-member constituency lawmakers are elected under a single winner voting system they need to gain support from middle-ground voters or swing voters. Public opinion polls are therefore quite significant in forecasting the election outcome and could be regarded as a proxy indicator. Using a "nomination committee" to nominate legislators-at-large, given that their election hinges on the party's overall performance at the polls, demonstrates a certain diversity and openness.

A number of political commentators have pointed out that the "nomination committee," whose members will be picked by Tsai, will carve up the party's nomination list among rivaling factions. But it remains to be seen whether the committee will have the feared effect or whether it will be able to attract suitable candidates from outside. However, the effects that the new nomination process has had so far is that legislators-at-large are seeking to win nomination as constituency-based lawmakers, since under the new rules their nomination as legislators-at large is highly uncertain. This development has strengthened Tsai's mechanism for drawing on forces outside the party.

The establishment of this mechanism is probably an important consequence of institutional management following the

DPP's first wave of reforms of its primary election system. Be it nominating presidential candidates and constituency-based lawmakers through national polls or using a "nomination committee" to select party list candidates, the most important effect of these approaches is input from different voices and forces in society to show that the primary election is an open process. Against expectations party member mobilization and factional struggles have declined at this point, as the adjustment of the nomination system has changed the incentive structures that influence the behavior of the political elites. Party image and connecting with society have become new issues for DPP politicians to work on.

The constituent members of the "nomination committee" will have landmark significance for strengthening this connection with society and for seeking majority support in the presidential election. Probably the committee's composition will draw greater attention than its nominations. An independent committee that enjoys public trust will likely be crucial in creating room for the DPP to increase its share of ballots that voters cast for their preferred party.

As for the national opinion poll, the traditional method of concurrently nominating the presidential and vice presidential candidates should be given up. The presidential

candidate should have full freedom to look for his or her running mate, because reaching out to society when nominating a vice presidential candidate is not less important than when forming a "nomination committee" for legislators-at-large. Whether the DPP can win majority support in the next presidential election depends on whether its mechanisms for connecting with society can be acknowledged and activated and then continue to ripen. **BT**