

Taiwan's First Power Transition in 2000

Learning by Doing

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In 2000, Taiwan completed the Chinese-speaking world's first-ever peaceful transfer of power to another political party as the candidate for the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Chen Shui-bian, won the presidential election with almost a 40 percent share of the vote. The opposition victory marked a milestone in Taiwan's democratic development, ending more than half a century of authoritarian rule and single party dominance by the Kuomintang (KMT).

A split in the KMT camp between supporters of KMT presidential candidate Lien Chan and KMT renegade James Soong as well as the electorate's hope for an end of KMT's "black gold politics" had built the historic momentum that brought about Taiwan's first ever change of the ruling party. During the election, both China and the KMT had played the "threatening card" of impending war should the DPP win the presidential race, with then Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji making verbal menaces and the KMT launching a string of "war" advertisements. Against this backdrop, and the fact that the three branches of Taiwan's armed forces at that time regarded Chen as their "joint enemy," Chen became the commander-in-chief of Taiwan's military forces immediately after winning the election in the evening of March 18. The first power transition in Taiwan's political history was a lucky coincidence. In the spotlight, people saw the first-ever president from an opposition party bask in his glory, but lurking behind the scenes were turbulent undercurrents caused by a number of uncertainties: Would the military be loyal to the new national leader, would the KMT hand over

power smoothly and peacefully, would China immediately use military force against Taiwan as threatened before the election, and how could the United States support Taiwan's democratic progress and simultaneously prevent the new president, an advocate of Taiwan independence, to take further steps toward independence?

For Chen and the DPP, the election victory marked only the beginning of a heavy responsibility to rule the nation, given that the DPP was not yet prepared to become the ruling party and lacked people with experience in government. Most of what was written in the policy white books on national security, foreign policy, and national defense that the DPP issued during the election campaign never had to stand the test of reality. Some policy proposals were unrealistic and unfounded propositions made by scholars who were not able to fully access actual national security and foreign policy intelligence, as well as had no clear precedent for a presidential transition to refer to. Many of the reform slogans and visions advocated during the election campaign were about to collide with harsh governmental reality and directly faced the test of various forms of domestic and foreign pressure.

On the domestic front, Chen and the DPP faced a race against time, hostility from the other side of the Taiwan Strait, the military loyalty issue, the urgency to form a cabinet and pressure from the spotlight of the domestic and international media. "Learning by doing" and "putting stability as top priority," they tried to gain experience during the transfer of power in forming various

government teams and in adjusting policy for a smooth transition. The “government of the whole people” that Chen promised to form with members of different political affiliations should he win the election, materialized as the immediate outcome of political compromises that Chen faced as the leader of a minority government.

When voting process closed in the afternoon of March 18, 2000, then Chief of the General Staff, General Tang Yao-ming, declared on TV that “no matter who is elected, the armed forces of the Republic of China will be loyal to the new commander-in-chief, the new head of state, and the new president.” Outgoing President Lee Teng-hui had prompted Tang to make this move, which to a certain extent temporarily defused the risk of a possible military backlash against the DPP government.

Chen’s foremost consideration during the political alternation and in setting his domestic agenda was appointing KMT member and former Defense Minister Tang Fei as the DPP government’s first premier for the sake of stability within the national defense and foreign affairs personnel systems as well as policy continuity, and to win the armed forces’ loyalty toward the DPP head of state and commander-in-chief.

On the diplomatic front, Chen and the DPP both faced the challenge whether their election pledges could be faithfully implemented. In his foreign policy white book Chen had for instance mentioned “forsake the myth of diplomatic allies’ number,” but when facing suggestions from the bureaucracy and pressure from diplomatic allies

after his election, he immediately changed course, emphasizing the continuity of foreign policy and foreign aid pledges. On the cross-strait front, White House had put pressure on the Chen camp before the election, urging that the presidential candidate must clearly state that if elected he will not declare Taiwan independence, will not enshrine the “two state theory” in the Constitution, and will not hold a referendum on unification or independence. The “Three Noes” later became the core of the “Five Noes” pledge that Chen made in his inaugural speech on May 20, 2000, regarding Taiwan’s political status. In return for Chen’s concessions, the United States remained neutral in the run-up to the election and expressed their view that “No matter who is elected as Taiwan’s president, the United States will always maintain good relations with Taiwan’s new government.”

From the perspective of selecting national security and foreign affairs staff, Chen faced several difficulties at the time, including:

1. He needed to take into account the stability of national security, foreign affairs, intelligence, national defense, and government personnel.
2. He needed to trust that the national security and foreign affairs experts who remained from the Lee Teng-hui era will share and pass on their experience.
3. He needed to squarely face the fact that the DPP lacked talent with practical experience in the fields of national security and foreign affairs.
4. He needed to accept that after actually

taking power some election pledges had to be brought in line with the actual state of national security and foreign affairs.

5. He needed to stick to his pledge, made before the election toward Taiwanese voters and the international community, that he will pursue a “new middle road” with the goal of normalizing cross-strait ties.

Although Chen was to be inaugurated as a “minority president,” he enjoyed popular support of nearly 80 percent in the hundred days before taking office. This popularity was mainly owed to his demonstration of reconciliation and goodwill by promoting a “government for the whole people” at home and conveying to China and the outside world the message that he hoped to relaunch cross-strait dialogue. The domestic and external challenges that followed as soon as he assumed office little by little exposed the mistakes that the national security and foreign affairs teams had made in policymaking and policy implementation. Moreover, Beijing continued to ignore Chen’s goodwill and increased diplomatic pressure against Taiwan. As a result, when pressure built with the nearing reelection campaign in the second half of Chen’s first term, the president switched to a political course that emphasized that Taiwan and China are “two countries on each side of the Taiwan Strait.” 