

DISENCHANTMENT IN TAIWAN

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WHEN TAIWAN'S President Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 came to power in a landslide election victory in January 2016, her supporters viewed her victory as expressing a truth about Taiwan being a progressive society. Tsai campaigned in support of indigenous reconciliation, same-sex marriage, and social equality. She had addressed her campaign rhetoric at Taiwan's young people and spoken of economic opportunities in a globalised economy. Tsai's win also went against the tide of right-wing populism that has beset many democratic polities. For her supporters, especially young urban professionals, Tsai's win signalled the indelible commitment within Taiwanese society to social progress and to coming to terms with Taiwan's authoritarian past through openness and dialogue.

In her first year, Tsai's government enacted policies that carried forward these progressive aspirations. These included an apology to Taiwan's indigenous peoples for four hundred years of dispossession, and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine the legacy of political violence in Taiwan under martial law from 1949 to 1987. Tsai's government also enjoyed a strengthening economy in the first year, with GDP growth in 2017 at 2.8 per cent — double the 2016 figure.

But in 2018, despite the positive economic news and the implementation of some of the government's social agenda, her government's fortunes waned. Tsai Ing-wen's personal approval rating, which was as high as seventy per cent in the months after

her election, slipped to the low thirties in mid-2018, with disapproval rising into the fifties. The polling of her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) hovered around twenty per cent approval in 2018 as well. Another major DPP figure, William Lai Ching-te 赖清德, elected to the mayorship of Tainan city with seventy-two per cent of the vote in 2014, and then appointed Premier in 2017, has also seen his personal political support decline, with fifty-three per cent disapproval and only thirty-seven per cent approval. Lai is a likely future DPP presidential candidate.

Voters expressed their discontent in emphatic terms in the November 2018 local elections for city and district councils, city mayorships, and other public offices. The DPP conceded control of much of Taiwan's local and city governments, holding only six of the twenty-two county and city regions. The DPP lost the mayorship of Kaohsiung for the first time in twenty years when their candidate Chen Chi-mai 陳其邁 lost to the Kuomintang's (KMT) Han Kuo-yu 韓國瑜.

Part of the malaise is due to the Tsai government failing to follow through with its most progressive promise, to legalise same-sex marriage, after Taiwan's constitutional court

ruled in 2017 that the current laws were unlawful. Furthermore, with a DPP majority in the legislature, the government also pushed through deeply unpopular changes to Taiwan's labour laws, loosening rules on working hours and holidays, and exposing itself to accusations of hypocrisy and complicity with corporate interests. Perennial issues like energy policy and pension reform have also damaged the government, as they did the previous government of Ma Ying-jeou. For the urban supporters who carried Tsai to victory, especially in the north of Taiwan, these failures have proved particularly disaffecting.

However, as the government's standing has fallen in the polls, the opposition KMT is yet to show that it has returned to a credible position at the national level. Its local election successes were a corrective after its crushing defeats in the local and municipal elections in 2014, and again at the presidential and legislative elections in 2016, and despite Han Kuo-yu's win in the south, it has no standout candidate for the 2020 presidential election and remains mired in internal division and low national polling numbers.

The political disaffection with Tsai and the DPP could be put down

Dwindling power: approval ratings for the Tsai government have dropped as a result of its failure to follow through with its promise to legalise same-sex marriages
Source: Felix Josephat, Flickr



to normal mid-term blues for a government with a mixed record in any liberal democracy. Similarly, for the opposition KMT, coming back from the lows of 2016 could take another election cycle.

But Taiwan is not, of course, a normal liberal democracy. An electorate that swings between extremes of hope and disillusionment has become a perennial feature of Taiwanese politics in the democratic era, and this expresses deeper concerns in the electorate about Taiwan's uncertain place in the geopolitical order.

Tectonic forces have been shifting in the region. Under Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has asserted China's global status and power through the Belt and Road Initiative, United Front work, and much else, testing politicians and policy-makers around the world. Until recently, the

world had enthusiastically accepted the PRC as an emerging market, rising power, and driver of global economic growth. Xi Jinping's ambitions for a 'New Era' of Communist modernisation, however, tests many of the fundamental precepts of the global neoliberal order in which European and US political and corporate power have set out the rules.

At the same time, the US, under Donald Trump, has revived its traditions of nativism and isolationism. It has undermined or upended many of the institutions, conventions, and received truths about the world order that had welcomed China's entry into the global economy in the first decades of reform.

Taiwan has long sat on the fault lines of US and Chinese power in the region. As both superpowers seek to



Trump administration support for Taiwan in 2018
Source: Adam Fagen, Flickr

remake themselves, and remake the world order in the process, Taiwan has been shaken by the shifting ground.

Beijing has ramped up efforts to limit Taiwan's international space and standing. In retaliation for Taiwan's election of a DPP president who openly resists its political pressure, Beijing ended the so-called diplomatic truce with Taipei that prevailed under the previous KMT government, which had been more accommodating towards the mainland. Beijing has been prevailing on Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies to officially recognise the People's Republic. In 2018, El Salvador joined Burkina Faso and the Dominican Republic in switching recognition to the PRC, adding to Sao Tome and Principe and Panama, who switched in 2017.

The Trump administration, meanwhile, has been notably supportive of Taiwan. The US Taiwan Travel Act, passed into law in 2018, encourages visits by senior US government figures to Taiwan. As a result, a stream of US politicians and government officials have been travelling to Taiwan and meeting with the president. In August, on her way to visit two diplomatic allies in Latin America, Paraguay and Belize, Tsai enjoyed a two-day stopover in the US. She spent time in Los Angeles and then Houston, where she met members of one of America's largest overseas Taiwanese communities, and also toured NASA's Johnson Space Center. Beijing protested to Washington that the visit was a breach of the one-China policy. The US State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said simply that the US policy on Taiwan had not changed and that 'the United States remains committed to our US one-China policy based on the three joint communiqués under the Taiwan Relations Act'. She noted that Tsai's stopover was 'largely undertaken out of consideration for the safety and comfort of those travellers'.¹

Such incidents remind Taiwanese voters of their place as a proxy for US-China relations. Beijing and the US are

engaged in a zero-sum game of photo opportunities, military manoeuvres, and hard policy over the Taiwan issue. Around the world, politicians and policy-makers schedule visits and meetings that signal their own position on Taiwan, and, by implication, whose side they take between the US and China.

Taiwan's status as a hapless pawn in the great power politics of the region is a long-standing theme in Taiwanese accounts of their political history. It informs the distinctive tone of much modern Taiwanese cultural and public discourse. Taiwanese artists, writers, and filmmakers have long captured the uniqueness of life in Taiwan with a bittersweet tone that expresses the sense of powerlessness in the face of greater forces.

It also has the effect of vitiating their democratic politics. Recognising the power that Washington and Beijing have in determining Taiwan's future diminishes the liberal democratic ideal of a sovereign people exercising their deliberative choices through elections and the policy-making of their chosen representatives. The poor polling for both the Tsai government and the op-

position KMT is a tacit acknowledgement of the limits of executive power in Taiwan and the impossible balance that a Taiwanese president must strike between the democratic aspirations of voters and the vicissitudes of geopolitics.

President Tsai's support is weakening as she attempts this impossible balancing act. She joins all her democratically elected predecessors from both sides of politics — Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九, Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁, and Lee Teng-hui 李登輝 — in a struggle against voter dissatisfaction and disappointment that derives in good part from forces beyond her control.

Geopolitics affects the changing fortunes of its politicians. But it also informs the dogged commitment of the Taiwanese to the ideal of democracy, woven so thoroughly now into the fabric of Taiwanese identity, and the enduring hold on their imaginations of the distinctiveness of their island society. While voters may be disaffected by Taiwan's noisy and partisan politics, this sense of distinctiveness continues to shape their political aspirations and hopes for their island home. Beijing, for all its pressure and belligerence, has failed to weaken these hopes.

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