

Support falls for major parties in leadup to Taiwan presidential election

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A local election held last weekend in Yunlin, a central Taiwan county, saw the ruling Kuomintang Party (KMT) win only 26.4 percent of the vote and trail in third behind an independent candidate and the main opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

Considering it a test of national electoral support in the lead-up to the presidential elections in March, the KMT invested considerable political resources into winning the Yunlin election. Among those who campaigned in Yunlin was Lee Teng-hui, the current president of Taiwan; Lien Chan, the serving vice-president and the KMT's presidential candidate for next year's poll; current Taiwanese premier, Vincent Siew, its candidate for vice-president; and a host of government ministers, legislators and supporters.

The KMT campaign directly linked the Yunlin by-election to a vote of confidence in the national government. One KMT slogan was "Love and Support President Lee". In the course of the election, Lee pledged that the Kuomintang would transform Yunlin, one of the poorest districts in Taiwan, into the island's "number one economic and industrial centre within 10 years".

The defeat has produced bitter recriminations in the Kuomintang over the loss of its local level support. The KMT, which had never lost an election in Yunlin, now holds less than one third of local government positions. Taipei mayor and KMT power-broker Ma Ying-jeou stated: "The result sent a warning. As a party member I felt deeply worried".

One factor in the loss of support for the KMT is the fallout over the earthquake that struck central Taiwan, including Yunlin district, on September 21. A comment by the *China Times* several weeks after the quake noted: "The island has experienced an almost unprecedented tide of outspoken anger against the

government party for what is widely perceived as slow, badly coordinated and insufficient rescue and relief efforts."

But the Yunlin election was not only a rejection of the Kuomintang. The editorial of the *United Daily News* last Sunday pointed out that "the image of both the KMT and the DPP failed to attract the voters... despite their all-out campaign efforts". DPP presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian, the former mayor of Taipei, had also publicly linked the Yunlin vote to next year's national election by visiting the county with large numbers of DPP parliamentarians.

Dominating Taiwan politics this year has been the rise in tensions with the mainland caused by President Lee's declarations that Taiwan and China are separate states. Lee's bellicosity has been supported by the DPP, which has responded to Kuomintang pledges to increase military spending by making its major election policies the modernisation of the military and increasing regional peace and security—bywords for an anti-China bloc. The presidential candidate of the minor Taiwan Independence Party has called for Taiwan to develop nuclear weapons in order to "ensure national independence and security".

The vote against the KMT and DPP is another indication of concern at the growing militarism of these parties and the independence advocates. While there is no broad support for a political union with the mainland, there is no desire to be in the firing line of a military clash with China, especially one that would almost certainly involve the United States.

Lee's statements have been interpreted as a provocation against China. They come at a time when the Chinese regime has become desperate to bring Taiwan into some form of union with the mainland and reduce the US military presence in the East Asian

region. Beijing has offered a Hong Kong style “one country, two systems” scenario that would exclude any mainland role on Taiwan, allow Taipei to maintain its own military and give Taiwan politicians a place in national Chinese government. It has even offered to change the name and flag of the Peoples Republic of China.

Lee's rejection of Beijing's overtures embody the view of powerful sections of the American, Japanese and Taiwanese corporate elite. They fear that the efforts of a new mainland-based capitalist class to restructure and modernise the Chinese economy could see China, backed by military and political clout, emerge as a formidable competitor.

Assertions of Taiwanese sovereignty have become one method of blocking this eventuality by justifying an expansion of US military engagement in the region, Japanese rearmament and an increase in Taiwan's already considerable military hardware. It is also being used to destabilise the Chinese regime and compel it to spend vast proportions of its national income on defence.

The fear in Taiwan of this confrontationist policy is being reflected in the growth of support for independent presidential candidate James Soong. A Kuomintang official and the former governor of Taiwan, Soong declared his candidacy after Lee's statements that Taiwan and China had an equal, or state-to-state relationship. His platform has been little more than maintenance of the status quo toward China, where both sides accept that Taiwan is part of China, combined with denunciations of official corruption and promises to look after the underprivileged.

In an opinion poll conducted for the *Journalist* magazine from October 28-29 in the industrial city of Keelung, 40.4 percent stated they would vote for Soong, 18 percent for the DPP and 14.8 percent for the Kuomintang. A poll in Taipei conducted by Shih Hsin University found 25 percent for Soong, 23 percent for the KMT and 14 percent for the DPP. The most recent national poll put support for Soong at 35.5 percent, the DPP 19.9 percent and the KMT only 12.1 percent, with 94.1 percent of the electorate intending to vote.

Soong's campaign is already leading to a possible split of the Kuomintang. With the KMT moving to expel Soong, a number of leading KMT power brokers have indicated they may go with him. On November

11, Soong stunned Taiwanese politics by announcing that his vice-presidential partner would be Chang Chao-hsiung, a renowned Taiwanese heart surgeon with no previous political affiliations or experience.

When martial law was lifted and democratic reforms introduced twelve years ago, the central dividing line between the Kuomintang and the DPP was their policy toward China. Sections of the urban middle and working classes initially sympathised with calls for a declaration of sovereignty. It was seen as an attack on the entrenched privileges and power of the Kuomintang apparatus, much of which had been transplanted from the mainland in 1949 when 1.6 million government officials, businessmen, landlords and soldiers fled the advance of Mao's peasant armies.

Now, there is little to distinguish the DPP from the KMT. Taiwanese sovereignty has placed the prospect of war on the agenda but there has been little in the way of social improvements for the working masses. Basic social welfare measures such as health insurance and retirement pensions remain inadequate. Unemployment in working class areas has grown to near 8 percent due to corporate layoffs. The island now has the widest gap between rich and poor for three decades, with the top 20 percent of society earning more income than the bottom 60 percent.

The gulf between the political elite and the aspirations and attitudes of the masses, while taking the distorted form of support for a Kuomintang relic like James Soong, is producing a sea-change in Taiwanese politics.



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