

Political tensions escalate after Taiwan's disputed presidential election

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Far from resolving political tensions in Taiwan, last Saturday's presidential election has only exacerbated them. After surviving an apparent assassination attempt last Friday—18 hours before the election—the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) leader Chen Shui-bian was declared reelected as president of the Republic of China.

With an 80 percent turnout, Chen Shui-bian's victory over his rival, the Kuomintang (KMT) chairman Lien Chan, was extremely narrow—only 29,518 votes out of more than 13.25 million, or just 0.2 percent. The result has created an open political standoff between the two camps as opposition supporters continue to question the legitimacy of Chen's victory.

The opposition has pointed to the unprecedented number of invalid votes—337,297 ballots, or three times the number in each of the two previous elections—and insinuated that Chen staged the shooting to generate an estimated half a million sympathy votes. A series of protests has taken place demanding a recount.

At the centre of the dispute is the issue of Taiwanese independence, on which Chen campaigned vigorously in an effort to bolster his vote among “native” Taiwanese. He was supported by sections of business that want to end the island's indeterminate status. The KMT, on the other hand, and its ally, the People's First Party (PFP), favour closer ties with China. Lien was backed by powerful corporate leaders who fear that a new Chen administration will lead to confrontation and even military conflict with China.

Chen Shui-bian declared his reelection was the “democratic decision of the Taiwanese people” and that Beijing must accept. But the voting pattern revealed a sharp polarisation. The north of the country, where two million Chinese settled after fleeing China following the 1949 revolution, generally voted for Lien, whereas the south, which remains overwhelming “native” Taiwanese, supported Chen.

A simultaneous referendum dealing with Taiwan's relations with China also revealed a sharp divide. It failed largely because of an effective boycott by its opponents, which meant that fewer than the legally required 50 percent actually voted. However, 90 percent of those who did cast a ballot, voted in favour of the referendum.

The referendum asked whether the government should establish an anti-missile system to defend the island from China and whether there should be “a framework of peace and stability” before negotiations were opened up with Beijing. While not an actual vote on Taiwanese independence, the referendum was nevertheless widely viewed as a step in that direction.

China repeatedly condemned the referendum. Beijing has in the past threatened to invade the island if it declares formal independence or of civil unrest breaks out that might lead to foreign intervention. France,

Germany, Japan and above all, the US—Taiwan's closest ally—exerted great pressure on Chen to back off from holding the referendum, creating an unprecedented diplomatic crisis.

The bitter debate between the DPP and the pro-unification KMT-PFP camps transformed the supposedly democratic exercise into a campaign of denunciation and mudslinging. On the eve of the poll, thousands of police and state security were mobilised to prepare for any political unrest. It was in this atmosphere that Chen and Vice President Annett Lu were shot last Friday while riding in an open jeep through southern Tainan City—Chen's hometown base—and waving to supporters.

The gunfire apparently hit Chen in the abdomen and Lu in the knee. Although a public hospital was closer, the two were taken five kilometres to a private hospital closely connected to former president Lee Teng-hui—now an ally of Chen. Neither was seriously wounded and both were discharged the next day.

Initially the opposition KMT-PFP condemned the shooting as an attack “on democracy” and offered a \$300,000 reward for the capture of the attacker. Its stance was motivated, at least in part, by the desire to shift any suspicion from its own shoulders. The KMT, which ruled Taiwan as a dictatorship for decades, is notorious for dirty tricks. Chen still blames the KMT for a traffic incident in 1985 in which his wife was run over three times by a truck and left paralysed from the waist down.

Following the shooting, the government put the country on security alert and mobilised 200,000 police and troops. This has also become the subject of contention: Lien claims that the security forces were unable to vote because they were on duty; the DPP insists that only 13,000 security personnel were prevented from casting a ballot, thus not affecting the election outcome.

Almost immediately, Taiwan's National Security Bureau rejected claims that the shooting was “politically motivated” or that China was involved, claiming it was merely a matter of “social disorder”. Police have identified the firearm used as a homemade handgun of the sort that can easily be bought on Taiwan's black market.

Whoever carried out the shooting, Chen certainly used it for all it was worth. He appeared at a polling station on Saturday, accompanied by bodyguards armed with submachine guns, and portrayed himself as a leader selflessly devoted to democratic ideals. “It doesn't matter where the bullet came from, A-bian [Chen's nickname] won't be struck down. And even if I were struck down, this could not strike down the aspirations of 23 million people for democracy and liberty,” Chen told reporters.

Immediately after the election result was announced, opposition politicians began pointing to the unanswered questions surrounding

the shooting and accused Chen of organising it himself. The president has vehemently denied the allegations.

Su Chi, a senior KMT official and Lien's adviser, for example, accused Chen of being a master of the "election gambit". In an account in the *New York Times*, Su recalled a local election in Tainan 18 years ago when Chen appeared at an election eve rally wheeling a drip and claiming to have been poisoned by KMT agents. The next day Chen appeared completely healthy.

Su claimed that the KMT had security service documents showing that the private hospital that treated Chen had not been designated for emergency use by the president. "The only explanation was that he wanted to go to an environment that he could control. If you go to a public hospital, someone would spill the beans," he said.

Defeated candidate Lien told a crowd of supporters on Saturday night: "The slim majority has been achieved under suspicious circumstances. It was not a fair election. Prepare to annul the election.... The country was stolen by an illegal method. I think the court is the last resort." People's First Party leader James Soong also declared the election to be manipulated and questioned the shooting.

The KMT immediately filed lawsuits calling for a recount and established an investigative team, including an international expert, to "address the suspicious gunshot case". On Sunday, Taiwan's High Court ordered the island's 13,700 ballot boxes to be sealed before a juridical decision is made on a recount. The court spokesman said on Monday that the legal process might take from one to six months.

Angry protests against the election result have taken place in major cities across the island. Around 10,000 Lien supporters rallied in front of the presidential office in Taipei on Saturday night. Hundreds of people set up tents near the building and maintained a vigil for days to demand a recount and an independent medical examination of Chen's wound.

Lien warned Chen that he could not control the protestors or any political unrest and urged the president to defuse the crisis by agreeing to a recount. Both Lien and his campaign manager—Taipei mayor Ma Ying-jeou—have urged protestors to leave. "I hope that social stability will be maintained. In order to achieve that goal, it is necessary for the government to respond quickly. Do the things that need to be done. If you try to avoid it, it will get worse. And then I don't know what will happen," Lien said.

Taiwan's stock exchange plunged 9.4 percent between last Friday and Tuesday amid growing concerns about political instability. On Monday, six major Taiwanese chambers of commerce and industrial associations called on the government to take action to stabilise the stock market and investor confidence.

Both Tokyo and Washington have appealed for calm. The US State Department called on both sides to "use the established legal mechanism to resolve any questions about the election results." Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi declared: "It is important that the confusion there ends quickly."

Under mounting pressure, the DPP parliamentarians proposed a new law on Wednesday to allow for an administrative recount within seven days if a candidate wins by less than 1 percent. "We hope to pass the revisions this afternoon after discussions with opposition lawmakers and start a recount as soon as possible," said DDP legislator Yeh Yi-jin.

Lien, who initially demanded an immediate recount and an investigation into the assassination attempt, was also considering a deal with the DPP late Wednesday to break the deadlock. The Central Election Committee chief declared that if the bill were passed, he

would organise 22,000 people to verify the votes on April 3.

In his first public appearance on television after the election, Chen declared that he was 100 percent in support of a full-scale recount. In an effort to prove he was actually shot, the Presidential Office has released photos showing Chen on a surgical bed after he was taken to hospital.

At this stage there is no agreement on how to proceed. At least one attempt to broker a deal ended in a fistfight between opposing parliamentarians. Lien has rejected an offer by Chen to hold a face-to-face meeting.

Whether or not a recount goes ahead and whoever is finally declared the winner, none of the underlying issues have been resolved. Continuing political unrest on Taiwan has the potential to provoke an intervention by Beijing that could rapidly embroil the major powers, including the US.

After three days of silence, an editorial in China's official Xinhua news agency strongly denounced Chen and his referendum. "The March 20 referendum vote was a political fraud designed by Chen Shui-bian [and] aimed at splitting the country, stirring up trouble between the mainland and Taiwan and seizing power," it stated.

At the same time, China's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing reportedly telephoned US Secretary of State Colin Powell on March 20, to urge the US to "do more" to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Other governments in the region are openly pointing to the dangers. Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander Downer bluntly warned Chen that he must act in a "very great degree of moderation" in dealing with China. "I think the last thing any of us want in the Asia-Pacific region is an escalation of tension between Taiwan and China."

Following the election, an official from Japan's Foreign Ministry declared that the worst case scenario for Japan would be if "China exercises its military might against Taiwan to forestall moves for independence, which could trigger increased military tension between China and the United States."

Such are the political tensions on the island, however, that, despite all the warnings, the crisis could rapidly spiral out of control.



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