

# Political standoff continues in Taiwan

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Uncertainty continues to surround the presidential inauguration in Taiwan due on May 20 as the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and two opposition parties—the Kuomintang (KMT) and People’s First Party (PFP)—remain deadlocked over the disputed March 20 election.

The DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian won the election by a tiny margin of 0.2 percent or less than 30,000 votes over his opponent, KMT chairman Lien Chan. Since then both sides have been waging a bitter campaign in the courts, parliament, diplomatic arena and media to claim the right to lead the island’s administration.

Although the DPP is preparing a huge rally of half a million to mark Chen’s inauguration, the final outcome of the poll remains unpredictable. An official recount is due to begin on May 10 and other legal proceedings are underway to annul the poll altogether.

While the immediate issues in dispute relate to the election, the irreconcilable standoff between the DPP and its opponents reflects fundamental divisions in the ruling elite. The DPP is seeking to establish Taiwan as an independent nation state. Beijing vehemently opposes any such move, insisting that the island is a renegade Chinese province, and has threatened to act, militarily if necessary, to prevent it. The KMT and PFP are seeking a political accommodation with Beijing that would preserve the substantial and growing Taiwanese business interests on the mainland.

In a bid to bolster his electoral support, Chen made a deliberate appeal to native Taiwanese hostility to the “mainlanders”, who arrived on the island after the KMT regime was overthrown by the 1949 Chinese revolution. Along with the presidential election, Chen held a referendum on whether or not a climate of peace and stability should precede any negotiations with China. A second question related to the building of an anti-missile system to counter Chinese missiles. The referendum was widely regarded as a precursor to a further referendum on full Taiwanese independence.

On the eve of the ballot, Chen and Vice President

Annette Lu were shot during a final rally in Chen’s hometown of Tainan. Both escaped largely unscathed and the resulting sympathy vote is widely credited with helping Chen to score his narrow victory. Immediately prior to the incident, polls had been predicting a DPP loss.

Immediately after it was announced, the opposition denounced the outcome, declaring that the poll had been rigged and that Chen had deliberately staged the shooting himself. After huge protests, bitter parliamentary infighting and legal manoeuvres, the DPP was finally forced to agree a full recount of 13 million votes, including invalid or blank ballots. The process is to take place under the supervision of judges from all over Taiwan with the assistance of the Central Election Commission.

The KMT-PFP alliance, however, is continuing its legal challenge in the Taiwan High Court on a number of grounds. The opposition is demanding that the judiciary be in sole charge of the recount and that a full list of all voters be published. At the same time, it has called for the election to be annulled, claiming election irregularities—including that soldiers and police were unable to vote due to a security alert on election eve. It also wants an independent investigation into the shooting incident.

At the first hearing on Wednesday, the High Court effectively threw out the call for a judicial recount, arguing that the opposition was calling for the election itself to be annulled. After hearing three hours of debate, the three-judge panel instructed the lawyers from both sides to provide more concrete evidence and specific legal argument. The onus is on the KMT to justify overturning the presidential poll.

Some of Chen’s closest aides have also become embroiled in legal battles. PFP legislators have accused Chiu I-jen, the secretary of the Presidential Office and Chen’s campaign manager, of illegally mobilising tens of thousands of troops and police following the shooting incident. Chiu has also been accused of deliberately exaggerating the extent of Chen’s injuries at a press conference on the afternoon of March 19. He has been

charged in relation to both claims.

To clear Chen of suspicion surrounding the shooting incident, the government invited a group of international experts including Dr. Cyril H. Wecht, who was involved in investigating the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy. But none of these efforts have eliminated the widespread suspicions that Chen manipulated the poll. Henry Lee, the leader of investigative team, concluded that he could not rule out the possibility that Chen staged the shooting.

Sharp divisions have opened up in both camps as a result of the continuing political turmoil and resultant economic uncertainty.

In March and April, opposition parties mounted a series of huge weekend protests against the election result, demanding an investigation into the shooting and a recount. The depth of feeling reflects concerns over Chen's autocratic methods as well as the widespread opposition that had developed prior to the election over the impact of Chen's economic restructuring on living standards.

Half a million people from throughout Taiwan turned out in the capital on March 27. Thousands of buses were used to transport the protestors who surrounded the presidential office and blocked major roads. A 15-foot-tall "Statue of Liberty" was erected. Lien Chan, standing in front of a banner declaring "democracy is dead", called for "resistance". He told the crowd that if anyone "uses nasty means to gain power, such power won't be effective and won't be respected".

The stock markets responded with sharp downturns to the mass rallies of between 50,000 and 300,000 people on the subsequent weekends in Taipei. Protestors clashed with thousands of riot police who used water cannons and armored cars, particularly on April 10, resulting in hundreds of injured. A permanent protest in front of the Presidential Office and a student hunger strike in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall were ended forcibly after Chen declared on April 4 that "our tolerance is limited".

The *Financial Times* noted on April 5: "The opposition Kuomintang has not presented any clear evidence for the claim [that Chen staged the shooting]. But people from all strata of society had followed Mr. Lien's call for street protests after the election. Many said they were not loyal followers of the KMT party but Mr. Chen's populist style of governing had eroded his credibility. Recent polls show that nearly 40 percent of respondents remain suspicious of the attack."

The involvement of masses of ordinary people in the

protests has provoked nervousness in the ruling elite on the island and the mainland. Taiwanese corporate leaders and Beijing have warned the opposition parties that they are playing with fire by stoking social and political ferment.

Factional conflicts have erupted within the KMT leadership. Taipei Mayor Ma Yinh-jeou, Lien's campaign manager and KMT vice chairman, has expressed his irritation at the continuing protests. He has publicly urged the party leadership to accept the March 20 result and call off further demonstrations, including a mass rally planned for May 19—the eve of Chen's inauguration.

After the April 10 rally, a series of polls have shown declining support for opposition leaders—Ma himself has dropped 23 percent and Lien decreased by 12 percent. Among other considerations, the KMT is concerned about the slide in its support prior to legislative elections due to be held in December.

Under the pressure of the political conflict, divisions have also opened up in Chen's government, which has been hit by a series of resignations of major figures. These include Interior Minister Yu Cheng-hsien and the Director-general of the National Security Bureau Chang Si-liang on April 5. Four days later, Foreign Minister Eugene Chien submitted his resignation.

Whatever the outcome of the May 10 recount, neither faction of the ruling class will be satisfied and the conflict is likely to intensify. Pressures from Beijing and Washington, which, at this stage, has officially urged Chen to maintain the status quo and not move towards independence, compound the tensions.

Chen told the media last week that his inauguration speech would neither irritate Washington nor "give Beijing an excuse" for provocative actions, but, having raised expectations about a vote on Taiwan independence, he is walking on a fine line.



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