

Taiwanese election dominated by dispute over relations with China

John Chan

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Taiwanese voters go to the polls today in parliamentary elections after a campaign that has been dominated by deeply contentious issues of history and the island's relations with China.

President Chen Shui-bian triggered the debate on November 9 with a proposal for a new high school history textbook that excluded Sun Yat-sen and record of the Republic of China prior to 1945 from sections dealing with "the history of Taiwan". Far from being an obscure historical issue, the proposed change has far-reaching implications for the status of Taiwan, which is currently regarded internationally as part of China.

Sun Yat-sen, leader of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), founded the Republic of China following the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in the 1911 revolution. After the victory of Mao Zedong's peasant armies in mainland China in 1949, the KMT leadership fled to Taiwan where it established its dictatorial rule with the backing of the United States.

The KMT always regarded itself as a government-in-exile for China as a whole. Its appeal to Sun Yat-sen as the "father of the nation" was designed to legitimise these claims. Sun was treated as a symbol of the state and his portrait has adorned government offices throughout the island for the past five decades.

The KMT's claims to mainland China suffered a major blow in 1971 when the Nixon administration in the US reached a rapprochement with Beijing based on the "one China" principle: the recognition of the Peoples Republic of China as the sole government of all China, including Taiwan, and the exclusion of Taiwan from most international organisations. The only compensation to Taiwan was a US guarantee to continue to defend the island against open military attack from the mainland.

For the past three decades, Taiwan has existed in a diplomatic no-man's land—not part of China, yet not recognised as an independent nation. Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province and has threatened to take military action if the island declares itself independent. Sections of the ruling class represented by the KMT are inclined to either maintain the status quo or to take up China's offer of integration on similar terms to Hong Kong—one country, two systems—as a means of consolidating their growing economic and political interests on the mainland.

Other layers of the ruling elite represented by Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are cautiously pushing towards establishing Taiwan as an independent state. They regard the island's current status as a semi-state as an intolerable barrier to the aggressive pursuit of their international ambitions. The

dispute over history in the current election is simply the latest form in which these bitter divisions have erupted.

The timing of Chen's proposal for a new history textbook was not accidental. It came just three days before the 138th anniversary of Sun's birthday, which traditionally was a state ceremony under the former KMT regime. Chen and the DPP were clearly aiming to undermine the KMT's prestige and any historic connection with the mainland.

The country's examination board further inflamed the issue by suggesting that Mandarin—the official language of mainland China—should no longer be the sole official language for exams, with consideration given to local dialects such as Minnan. Leading examination officials even suggested that Sun Yat-sen should be regarded as a "foreigner" and removed from his official position as "father of the nation".

These proposals, which were widely viewed as steps toward Taiwanese independence, provoked considerable outrage. The depth of feeling was indicated by a 76-year-old veteran soldier who committed suicide by cutting his throat in front of a statue of Sun Yat-sen on November 12. On the same night, a series of explosions took place near the Education Department, leading to speculation that it was a protest against the new textbook.

On the other side, the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), a DPP ally, adopted an even more extreme stance. During a campaign meeting in southern Taiwan on November 13, TSU leader Lee Teng-hui was hailed by his supporters as "the father of Taiwan". A TSU legislator even suggested the KMT should posthumously expel Sun from its membership roll. TSU candidates strongly criticised Chen for being too soft and called on him to completely repudiate Sun, along with the Republic of China.

Chen, however, has remained cautious, out of concern for the international reaction—not only from China, but also from the US. While the Bush administration maintains its military defence of Taiwan and has recently sold sophisticated weaponry to the island, it has nevertheless refused to support an independent Taiwan and has cautioned Chen against steps in that direction.

Chen has responded to the TSU's criticisms by declaring that he is in fact the 11th president of the Republic of China and calling on the public not to blacken "the father of the nation". Having set the debate in motion, however, Chen has continued to add further fuel. The government has ordered an end to the use of KMT-era slogans and customs by the military, in ceremonial venues and at schools. Last month, the president urged the KMT to change its century-old

party emblem within three months because it is identical with Taiwan's national flag.

In the latest shot in the debate, Chen last weekend declared that the names of state-owned enterprises such as "China Steel" or "China Airlines" as well as those of diplomatic missions abroad, should include the word "Taiwan". Washington reacted immediately, declaring that the changes of terminology "would appear to unilaterally change Taiwan's status and for that reason we're not supportive of them".

The turn to nationalist appeals by the two major electoral alliances, not only reflects sharp divisions in ruling circles over the future of Taiwan, but also their incapacity to offer any solution to the social crisis confronting working people.

The KMT, long despised for its decades of autocratic rule, lost the presidential elections to Chen in 2000 for the first time. Its promotion of Chinese nationalism is aimed at appealing to the descendents of those who fled from the mainland in 1949 and to those who fear that a move to Taiwanese independence will provoke a catastrophic war with China. Out of office, the KMT has attempted to garner support from those who have been hard hit by Chen's free-market policies, by calling for their watering down.

The DPP, which was illegal until the early 1990s, has long attempted to posture as a defender of democratic rights and the social conditions of working people. Having won office, however, Chen has continued the KMT's policies of economic restructuring that have led to rising levels of poverty and unemployment, particularly in the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. The greater the anger at his economic policies, the more Chen has tried to portray himself as a champion of Taiwanese nationalism.

None of the parties has any plan to ameliorate the hardships facing workers and farmers. As a result, the issues of history and communal identity—"mainlanders" versus "native Taiwanese"—have been made central to the election campaign to divert voters into two equally reactionary forms of nationalism.

This has produced an explosive political mixture that has already erupted once this year. Just hours before the March 20 presidential elections, Chen and his vice-presidential running mate were injured in an attempted assassination. He won the poll by the narrowest of margins—just 30,000 votes out of 12 million—provoking huge KMT rallies of up to half a million people who insisted that the assassination attempt had been staged to generate sympathy votes and steal the election.

The protests only ended when corporate leaders, concerned that the instability was spiralling out of control, brought pressure to bear on the KMT leadership. But the matter did not stop there. The KMT took out a series of court cases aimed at overturning the election result, before being finally forced to accept the outcome of a recount handing victory to Chen. On November 4, after months of investigations and court hearings, the Taiwan High Court finally ratified the recount and ruled that other charges against Chen were not founded—a verdict that the KMT has rejected.

As a result, the stakes in the current election are high. Currently the DPP holds only 87 of the 225 parliamentary seats in the parliament, with the rest largely controlled by the KMT and its ally, the Peoples First Party (PFP). A parliamentary majority of three-quarters is required in order to carry out constitutional

changes—something that Chen has promised to do before the end of his term of office.

In the past, the KMT, with its domination of the state apparatus and significant business interests, has held the financial upper hand in elections. This time, however, powerful corporate interests are pouring money into the DPP's campaign—to the tune of \$US10 million. This does not count the \$500,000 each candidate has to spend on advertisements and rallies.

The campaign is highly polarised. In an interview with the British-based *Economist* magazine last month, KMT leader Lien Chan declared that the election would decide Taiwan's future and warned that Chen's aim was to create a "Republic of Taiwan". PFP chairman James Soong went further, warning of the danger of military conflict with China: "I hope voters will not force their offspring to go to war because of a wrong decision."

Some 1,500 riot police were deployed in the capital of Taipei last weekend in anticipation of possible clashes between the rival camps. The DPP cancelled its rally but the TSU provocatively went ahead raising banners declaring: "For constitutional amendment, a Taiwanese state and a change to the official title". The KMT, on the other hand outlined used its platform to appeal for "No War with China", to oppose changes to history textbooks and to defend the "Republic of China".

Polling indicates that the result today will be close. Whatever the outcome, the political tensions are likely to intensify.



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