

Mass protests demand resignation of Taiwan's president

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A huge protest in Taipei last Friday besieged the office of President Chen Shui-bian and demanded his resignation over corruption allegations. Police estimated the number of protesters at 350,000, but organisers claimed that more than a million people took part in a march that stretched over five kilometres.

The rally was organised by Shih Ming-Teh, a former chairman of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), with the backing of the opposition Kuomintang (KMT). The Taipei city government, headed by KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou, provided the venue for the rally and mobilised around 4,000 police to maintain order. On Saturday, the DPP organised its own rally of tens of thousands to boost the beleaguered president.

The “anti-corruption” protests have drawn significant popular support from layers of working people, angry over the impact of Chen’s economic restructuring measures. Shih’s campaign, however, reflects sharpening differences in Taiwan’s ruling circles over Chen’s increasingly open appeals to Taiwanese nationalism, which threaten to provoke a confrontation with China. Beijing regards Taiwan as a “renegade province” and has threatened to take military action if it declares formal independence.

The corruption allegations first surfaced in May when prosecutors arrested Chen’s son-in-law, Chao Chien-min and charged him with insider trading related to a state-controlled property developer. Chao had amassed a fortune of \$NT170 million (\$US5.1 million). Further allegations have since emerged of corrupt activities by members of Chen’s family.

In June, the opposition KMT attempted to formally recall Chen via parliament—that is, dismiss him—but failed to achieve the constitutionally required two-thirds vote. Public anger continued to mount, however, over corruption charges and Chen’s failure to improve living standards.

Shih launched his crusade on August 14 with a call for Chen to resign and an appeal to his supporters for donations of \$NT100. Within a week he had received \$NT109 million from more than a million people and launched a series of protests. On September 9, around 100,000 people participated in Shih’s “A Million Voices Against Corruption—Chen Must Go” rally in the centre of Taipei.

Chen responded by promising more jobs and again appealing to Taiwanese nationalism. He declared last week that he would prepare a new constitution and press for a seat for Taiwan in the United Nations. Taiwan lost its seat in the UN and other international bodies in 1972 when the US administration reestablished relations with mainland China and formally adopted the so-called One China policy, which accepts Beijing’s claims over Taiwan.

Shih’s leadership of the anti-Chen movement indicates a breakup within the DPP, which was formed in the 1980s to oppose the KMT’s dictatorial methods of rule. The party made a deliberate appeal to the native Taiwanese, against the KMT supporters who fled China in the wake of the 1949 Chinese revolution. In opposition to the KMT, which claimed to be the legitimate government of China in exile, the DPP advocated an independent Taiwan.

Shih was a longstanding DPP activist. He was arrested in the 1960s for setting up the “Taiwan Independence League” and sentenced to life imprisonment. Released in 1977, he became one of the leaders in the emerging pro-independence movement that led to the DPP’s formation. The DPP had the backing of layers of the corporate elite, who were demanding market reforms, an end to the KMT’s cronyism, and an independent state to integrate the island more closely into the global economy.

As China emerged in the 1990s as the world’s premier cheap labour platform, support for Taiwanese independence waned in ruling circles. Taiwanese

companies have their own massive investments in China and want closer relations with Beijing, rather than a confrontation over independence. The KMT has dropped its former opposition to Beijing and now advocates closer ties.

Shih represents a layer of DPP leaders and supporters who are seeking to distance themselves from the DPP's call for Taiwanese independence. As DPP chairman from 1993-96, he began to call for a "great rapprochement" with China, bringing him into sharp conflict with Chen. He quit the DPP in 2000. In 2002, he was even considered as the KMT nominee for mayor of Taiwan's second largest city, Kaohsiung.

Behind Shih is a new political formation composed of DPP leaders, women associations and sections of the trade union leadership. The so-called Alliance of Fairness and Justice (AFJ), formed in 2003, is known as the "purple" camp, in contrast to the pro-independence parties, known as the "green camp" and the pro-China parties, known as the "blue camp".

The AFJ is not a formal political party but often claims to support the "under-privileged" and makes appeals for the building of a "social welfare" system. Its leader, Chien His-chieh, was a former leader of the largest DPP faction, New Tide. The DPP initially attempted to recruit the AFJ as a coalition partner in parliament, and thus undermine the opposition KMT and People First Party (PFP), a former KMT faction led by James Soong. At the time, the KMT accused the AFJ being a "left" organisation.

The AFJ has sought to capitalise on the growing disaffection with the DPP over declining living standards. Chien appeals for a return to the old DPP ideals, promoting the illusion that it would carry out social reforms. The grouping has become a convenient banner for sections of the trade union bureaucracy, who are looking to cover up its own failure to wage any consistent political campaign against the impact of free market restructuring.

Taiwan's top economic official—Hu Sheng-cheng, chairman of the Council for Economic Planning and Development—admitted last month that only 30 percent of the population had benefitted from economic growth while the remaining 70 percent experienced wage stagnation or decline. Not only are Taiwanese corporations transferring manufacturing operations to China, but many public sector workers face the loss of jobs and conditions as a result of economic restructuring.

As the DPP has suffered major losses in parliamentary

and local elections over the last two years, the AFJ has moved closer to the KMT. The KMT in turn has dropped its former objections to the AFJ, which provides a useful means for enhancing its own electoral standing. The KMT is still widely discredited by its decades of dictatorial rule and endemic corruption. It failed to defeat Chen in the 2004 presidential election despite the widespread opposition to the DPP.

The AFJ is also appealing to a certain shift in public mood. The DPP's rhetoric has increasingly pitted "native Taiwanese" against "mainlanders" who form the KMT's base. Chen has attempted to discriminate against "mainlanders" by promoting local languages and culture. By calling itself the "purple camp", the AFJ is capitalising on the growing disgust with communal politics. Shih has denounced the rot of Taiwanese "democracy" and called for a "popular" movement transcending "partisan" politics.

The KMT and PFP have supported the AFJ protests as a means of leveraging Chen from power, but are concerned about Shih's populist appeals. Shih has cautiously warned of a "national strike" by affiliated trade unions as a last resort to force Chen to step down. He floated the date of October 10—a national holiday—in order to minimise any impact of businesses. However, the government, the KMT and the corporate elite have all sharply opposed any strike, warning it would threaten economic and social stability.

Smaller protests have continued this week in Taipei and spread to a number of southern cities, leading to clashes between pro- and anti-Chen demonstrators, resulting in dozens of arrests. There is considerable nervousness in ruling circles over the ongoing protests. The KMT is considering a parliamentary motion to remove the cabinet as a means of defusing the movement. Leading DDP legislators have expressed concern about the size of last Friday's rally and suggested that the government cancel the October 10 national holiday to avoid any repetition.



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