

Taiwan elections reveal widespread hostility to the ruling DPP

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Taiwan's local elections last weekend produced a landslide defeat for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), revealing deep dissatisfaction over deteriorating living standards and fears about the rising trade war tensions between the US and China that are leading to war.

The DPP lost seven of the 13 city and county seats it has held since 2014, including the southern city of Kaohsiung, a DPP stronghold for 20 years. The rival Kuomintang (KMT) captured 15 seats, up from six. Taipei City remained in the hands of a so-called independent Ko Wen-je.

Voter turnout was among the highest recorded, with polling stations remaining open past the advertised closing time in parts of Taipei and Kaohsiung.

The widespread losses prompted token resignations. President Tsai Ing-wen stepped down as party chief—though continuing as the country's president—thus opening the possibility of a leadership struggle for the 2020 presidential elections.

"I hereby announce my resignation as chairwoman and shoulder responsibility," Tsai said. "We have learned a lesson and must reflect on ourselves as, obviously, voters have a higher expectation of us."

Fellow party members, Premier William Lai and presidential secretary general Chen Chu, also offered to resign, only to be asked to stay on.

The results are a stark reversal of the 2014 local elections, in which the then ruling KMT was resoundingly defeated in response to a stagnating economy and worsening social crisis, including high youth unemployment.

Of significance is the rise of third-party candidates, exploiting the broad hostility to the two major parties. Of the 912 local legislature seats, independent candidates claimed 280, up from 221 in 2014. They

outnumber the DPP, which lost 70 seats, cutting its overall total to 238. The KMT gained 20 seats, securing 394 all up.

KMT candidate Han Kuo-Yu's victory in the previous DPP stronghold of Kaohsiung provides an indication of Taiwan's underlying class tensions. Despite receiving no money or resources from his party, which perceived the seat as unwinnable, he won 53.87 percent of the vote by fashioning himself as a political outsider.

The media depicted the contest as being between "vegetable vendor" Han and a "political elite [candidate] born out of a rich and political family." Speaking before a pre-election rally of 200,000 cheering supporters, Han promised to "make Kaohsiung great" again.

"If I was elected mayor, I would return the city to its former glory, when people were rich and young men were able to find a decent job," Han said.

Such populist promises fly in the face of reality as Taiwan's export-dependent economy continues to slow. In the first half of 2018, real gross domestic product growth fell to just 1.5 percent, from 4 percent in the second half of 2017.

Taiwan is caught up in the trade war instigated by the US against China, which has affected major corporations with operations on the mainland, especially electronics companies that account for about a third of Taiwan's exports. Foxconn, the world's largest electronics contract manufacturer and a major supplier for brands such as Apple, has seen its share price drop more than 8 percent in recent weeks.

In addition, Taiwan's steel sales to the US have dropped 12 percent since Trump imposed a 25 percent tariff on imported steel and a 10 percent tariff on aluminium in March. The island's tech industries could

be further affected if the US carries out its threat to raise tariffs on \$US200 billion worth of Chinese imports from 10 percent to 25 percent in January.

During the election campaign, the DPP, in concert with the US, waged a hysterical campaign against Chinese “interference,” claiming that Beijing was spreading disinformation throughout Taiwan in order to confuse voters and sabotage electoral processes. DPP officials seized upon an intelligence agency’s report to launch an investigation into the alleged meddling.

In reality, many voters were concerned about Taiwan’s flagging economy and the tensions that have increased between Taipei and Beijing since Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016. Under Trump, the US has forged closer ties with Taiwan and provided support for the DPP, which has long advocated a more independent stance from China.

Tsai has refused to officially acknowledge the “1992 Consensus,” a diplomatic agreement that both the mainland, or People’s Republic of China, and Taiwan, or the Republic of China, constitute part of the same country, while leaving open the character of the government. Acknowledging the “One China” principle is a precondition for talks with Beijing.

Emboldened by the US, Tsai proposed greater independence and a stronger military, resulting in a freeze in formal cross-strait dialogue.

As part of the local elections, voters were asked whether its international sports teams should change their name from Chinese-Taipei to Taiwan. That move would anger Beijing and could risk Taiwan’s right to compete in the Olympics. The referendum was overwhelmingly defeated.

Commenting on the election results, China’s state-run *China Daily* criticised the DPP. “The election shows that the Tsai administration has betrayed Taiwan’s interests and become a troublemaker whose actions have drifted farther away from the practical needs of the Taiwan people and the historical truth of the consensus that there is only one China,” it said.

The KMT, which ruled Taiwan as a dictatorship for decades after it fled China following the 1949 Chinese revolution, has insisted that the island is part of China. After Beijing moved to restore capitalism from 1978, it effectively shelved its claim to be the rightful ruling party of all China, and developed closer relations with the Chinese Communist Party regime.

After the election victory, KMT chairman Wu Den-yih told reporters his party was committed to reducing diplomatic frictions with China and returning to mutually beneficial, two-way trade. “We hope the two sides will soon go back to a peaceful and stable trend in relations,” he said.

The Trump administration has deliberately stoked tensions with China over Taiwan. Just last month the US navy sailed warships through the Taiwan Strait, the second time this year. Washington also has sealed two major arms deals with the island, totalling over \$1.7 billion. China has responded with threatening military exercises, simulating an invasion by flying bombers and other military aircraft around the island, as well as sailing its aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait.

As Trump ratchets up the US trade war and military provocations with China, Taiwan, a dangerous geopolitical flashpoint, increasingly will be drawn into the conflict.



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