

Taiwan's local elections a blow to ruling DPP and Washington

Ben McGrath

30 November 2022

Taiwan's local elections last Saturday resulted in a significant defeat for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), with the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) securing a majority of the municipality, city, and county seats across the island.

The KMT took control of 13 out of 22 local government seats, including key cities like Taipei and Taoyuan. Notably, the KMT's Chiang Wan-an, the great-grandson of dictator Chiang Kai-shek, defeated the DPP's Chen Shih-chung for mayor of Taipei. Chen served as health minister for much of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chiang's victory brings the KMT back to power in its traditional stronghold, currently held by Ko Wen-je of the minor Taiwan People's Party (TPP).

The DPP lost two seats, reducing its total to five. Nominal independents took two others, while the TPP took Hsinchu City. A special election will be held December 18 for Chiayi City, which the KMT is also expected to win, bringing the party's total to 14, the same number held before the election.

The results are less a sign of support for the KMT than an expression of dissatisfaction with the entire political establishment. Voter turnout was low compared to past local elections, with about 60 percent of people participating, compared to 66.11 percent in 2018. Both the DPP and KMT are deeply unpopular, with only 31 percent and 14 percent of people supporting the parties respectively.

The result has been received with apprehension in the US media, concerned over the impact on Washington's confrontation with Beijing over Taiwan. The Biden administration following on from Trump has provocatively strengthened ties with Taiwan, thereby undermining the One China policy under which the US de-facto has recognized the island as part of China and Beijing as its legitimate government. In doing so, the

US has encouraged the Taiwanese nationalist DPP to move towards independence—a step that Beijing has warned it will oppose with force.

In its efforts to goad China into a war over Taiwan, the US has relied on the support of Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen and her DPP. Thus the election result comes as blow to the US, which routinely declares that Tsai and the DPP are the popular representatives of Taiwanese “democracy,” standing up to mainland China's “aggression.”

Tsai herself attempted to make the local elections a referendum on her government's handling of relations with Beijing. In a barely disguised challenge to the One China policy, she told a November 12 rally, “I want to tell everyone that the existence of Taiwan and Taiwanese people's insistence on freedom and democracy are not a provocation to anyone.” She continued: “As president, my calling is to make every effort to let Taiwan still be the Taiwan of the Taiwanese people.”

While economic and social issues were major factors in the election, the result also reflects real fears about Taiwan being transformed into a US pawn for a war with China. Nina Chen, a 50-year-old Taipei resident who voted for Chiang Wan-an told the *Wall Street Journal*: “What I care [about] the most is peace across the strait because our lives and property are already threatened.”

After the election, President Tsai resigned as head of the DPP, a common and largely symbolic gesture to give the impression someone is “taking responsibility” for the party's loss. Tsai remains president until the end of her second term in 2024.

The US media has attempted to downplay the significance of the vote, pointing out that the low polls for the KMT indicate that it was unlikely to oust the

DPP in the 2024 presidential elections. The KMT established a US-backed dictatorship on Taiwan after being driven out of China in the 1949 Chinese revolution, but following the restoration of capitalism in China has sought closer economic ties with the mainland.

The *Wall Street Journal* attributed the results to poor weather, election burnout following recent referendums, and COVID restrictions. Its article quoted Wen-ti Sung, a political scientist in the Taiwan Studies Program at Australian National University, who claimed, “We cannot infer this to be a loss for DPP’s China policy platform.”

Certainly, other local issues played a significant role in the election. Taipei’s decision to allow COVID-19 to tear through the population had an impact. In the past week alone, there have been 102,576 new cases, placing Taiwan in the top ten in the world for cases per million people. It also currently has the second-highest deaths per million. Total overall cases stand at 8,313,366 with 14,334 deaths, most occurring since April.

National Taiwan University Professor Chan Chang-chuan, a public health expert, criticized Taipei’s handling of the pandemic in a Facebook post on Monday, writing, “A COVID case, no matter if it ends in recovery, hospitalization, or death, is a very unpleasant experience of illness that has the patient and the patient’s family living in continuous anxiety, fear, and inconvenience for over a month. It is therefore inevitable that the difficult COVID experience affects many people’s election behavior.”

Youth unemployment remains high, with 12.27 percent of 20 to 24-year-olds officially out of work. Wages have been stagnant for more than two decades, with a recent university graduate earning about \$1,000 a month now compared to \$975 in 2000. For those under 40, 65 percent are in debt.

At the same time, while consumer prices have risen a comparatively low 3.1 percent this year, they have spiked sharply for food and fuel, particularly over the spring and summer when food prices rose 7.4 percent in May. Food prices rose 5.17 percent in October.

The Taiwanese ruling class however has profited during the pandemic, with the economy growing 6.28 percent in 2021, its fastest rate since 2010. The economy grew 3.11 percent in 2020. These social

conditions demonstrate the sharp class divide that exists in Taiwan.

Undoubtedly, the worsening social and economic conditions facing working people influenced the votes of many. However, voters in Taiwan have always been acutely conscious of the state of relations across the Taiwan Strait with China. The prospect of being plunged into a US proxy war against China—as has happened to the Ukrainian people—was weighing on their minds as they cast their ballot.



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