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**Taiwan and the Upcoming Election without the ‘Hong Kong Factor’: The Choice of ‘Independence,’ ‘Closer Ties’ or ‘Pragmatism’**

**BY STROBE DRIVER**

During the Taiwan Republic of China (ROC) election of (January) 2020, it is widely acknowledged, the political ructions in Hong Kong had considerable influence on the outcome of the election. Whilst there were other issues, such as the ubiquitous ‘state of the economy’ and ‘standard of living’ debates along with other relevant domestic issues, it would be what was happening in Hong Kong that would come to sway voters. The outcome ultimately favoured President Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in general. Thus, the DPP would gain another term in office. The victory would comprise of but not be limited to President Tsai securing 57% of the vote; of there being a higher voter turnout since the 1990s; of young voters (under 40)

demonstrating a will to distance themselves from China; and that the DPP's independence-driven platform resonated with young adults and the middle class which would come to form a rejection of China's 'one country, two systems' model of governance.<sup>1</sup> To give the aforementioned a perspective, according to Lai, China's hard-line approach to Taiwan and the social unrest in Hong Kong in which pro-democracy protests evolved into violent confrontations, and the subsequent crack down by the Hong Kong police force became the main factors in the 2020 Taiwan election. The actions that were happening in Hong Kong had a knock-on effect within Taiwan as they produced a raised political awareness amongst a younger generation of voters, and this would go on to elevate the DPP's independence-driven stance. Victory for Tsai became increasingly apparent as the electioneering unfolded.<sup>2</sup> President Tsai would win a second term and be sworn in (May 2020) and due to the American-style presidential system must step down at the end of her second term in 2024 – Tsai's chosen successor is Lai Ching-te (賴清德), also known as William Lai.

In keeping with the principles of government and governance within a liberal-democracy, Taiwan is no different than liberal-democracies around the world in that a political party is able to be formed and registered by any individual or bloc. To be sure, Taiwan is, in political terms, is a representative democratic republic which allows for the aforementioned freedom of action to take place. In the case of Taiwan, there and in regard to Article 7 of the *Political Parties Act* – Ministry of the Interior (內政部), the following legislation applies:

Upon the founding of a political party, applicants shall file a declaration, a party charter, a party roster containing the signatures and seals of at least one hundred (100) members of the political party,

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Bernstein, "The Impact of the Hong Kong Protests on the [2020] Elections in Taiwan," Interview with Christina Lai, *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, January 23, 2020, at <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-impact-of-the-hong-kong-protests-on-the-election-in-taiwan/>.

<sup>2</sup> Christina Lai, *ibid.*

a roster of the party officers, records of the founding assembly, and records of the party officer selection process to the competent authority within thirty (30) days of said founding assembly. After all documentation has been received, the competent authority shall issue an official seal and a certificate of accreditation.<sup>3</sup>

Taiwan for many years, and since the inception of it becoming a liberal-democracy – with the first direct general election being held in 1996 – has been dominated by two major parties: the Kuomintang (KMT) and the DPP. As with all politics of, and within robust liberal democracies, it is a germane yet necessary point to make, that there has been many machinations in Taiwan’s politics up to and including breakaway groups cum blocs. There have been ructions and splits within the two parties mentioned and it is here that the introduction of a new party, one which it can be safely argued has gained much momentum since its inception in 2019 and moreover, has become a significant threat to the two previous powerbrokers – the KMT and DPP. The newcomer can now be introduced: the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP). Bearing in mind the KMT and the DPP are the well-established contenders for the presidency and control of the parliament, the TPP has nonetheless, highlighted doubts about the capabilities of the two traditional rivals which is in part, due to the persistency of China and its retrocession aims; and ‘rusted on’ attitudes of the DPP and the KMT. As much as this is a relatively easy aspect of politics to highlight for a newly-minted opposition, it is also an attention-grabbing exercise which has the ability to resonate through a population – as per the ‘drain the swamp’ mantra by Donald Trump, which had no evidence-base per se, but was designed to directly inflame opposition to ‘Washington elites’; and gain Trump power. In the case of Taiwan and the upcoming election of January 2024, it is once again the frictions with China that have come to the fore. The TPP has chosen a position of ‘careful consideration’ which has then been underscored this by a ‘willingness to fight,’ should China move on its retrocession of Taiwan.

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<sup>3</sup> Law and Regulations Database of The Republic of China (Taiwan), available at <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=D0020078>.

The independence-stance by the DPP has not altered and the 'closer ties with China' aspects of the KMT remain solidly in place, and the TPP has used the aforementioned 'rusted on' aspects of the two major actors and slotted itself neatly in between. By using the two points of 'consideration' and 'fighting' the TPP has gained leverage; separated itself from what has 'gone before'; and offered a nuance to the situation-at-hand. To be sure and as with many a country however, there are numerous facets that continue to plague Taiwan's society: high house prices, social security through to governance are only some. However, Taiwan is also plagued by an ongoing and ubiquitous threat of, and from, China – which as has been stipulated, this remains a most pressing problem. Notwithstanding the aforesaid, all problems over the previous eight years are able to be pinned on the DPP; and prior to that the KMT. This factor in and of itself, offers the TPP some considerable advantage especially since it was formed in order to separate it from so-called pan-Blue and pan-Green voting blocs – essentially comprising for pan-Blue comprising of the KMT and the People First Party; and the DPP and the Taiwan Solidarity Union in the pan-Green.

In order to gain ground, the TPP has promised five platforms of "Social security; Economic prosperity; Environmental stability; Residential justice; and Fiscal discipline,"<sup>4</sup> and all will be honoured and maintained. This is standard practice for a political party and especially one that has not had to govern. With regard to the most pressing problem of China, the TPP envisages a new approach: "pragmatism." The term in and of itself is, it can be argued, a somewhat subjective term as when used can mean 'realism,' 'uncomplicatedness,' 'logically' and 'rationality' through to 'reasonableness.' Whilst the TPP is free to use any lawful terms as a political competitor, and especially with regard to China's retrocession ambitions, it should be duly noted that China does not observe the China-Taiwan situation in the same way.

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<sup>4</sup> Taiwan People's Party, at [https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/core\\_values.php](https://www.tpp.org.tw/en/core_values.php).

For China, the retrocession of Taiwan is not only uncomplicated, it is also reasonable and logical. Context is everything. Nonetheless, the TPP according to its chairman Ko Wen-Je, has grounded its approach to China through a prism of, “We do not seek war but are not afraid of fighting a war; we must be prepared for the war and be able to fight.”<sup>5</sup> Ko also believes national defence should not be a slogan, but an all-population concern<sup>6</sup> which in turn sends a signal of community responsibility through nationalism, or more precisely, “we are all in this together.” The extent with which the aforementioned differs from the DPP and the KMT remains within the nuance of what the TPP’s form of ‘pragmatism’ actually represents. Certainly, and as previously stipulated, it slots neatly into the gap between the strong and hard-line independence-stance of the DPP; and the more moderate cum friendly approach of the KMT. The TPP is, it claims, pragmatic in its realisations associated with China, although it is able to take a more forceful approach if needed. At least, this is the approach it will take as the election comes ever-closer; and indubitably, it will be hoping the approach ‘cuts through’ the DPP and KMT rhetoric and thus, appeals to a more politically-aware younger voter and also the middle-classes which delivered power to the current government.

It is the contention of the above narrative therefore, that the violence in Hong Kong between democracy protesters and the Chinese authorities that occurred during the 2020 election were instrumental in propelling the DPP to another term in office. To be sure, the events overrode any domestic difficulties and, correspondingly, the threat of China loomed largest and, to give the situation an astute perspective, what occupation under China’s rule was writ large: violent oppression if there was disagreement with the Chinese status quo. Since 2020 the events in Hong Kong have dissipated somewhat and it has become much more settled, in that it is no longer front of mind

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

to the domestic population of Taiwan per se, and it is only the military fly-overs and Taiwan Strait incursions by China that remain a constant. Herein lies an advantage for the TPP, as the incursions by China's air force (the People's Liberation Army Air Force) are simply a 'more of the same' scenario and do not, it can be argued, require the same amount of intense scrutiny that the Hong Kong situation did. The outcome for the population of Taiwan remains alert to, but not alarmed by, said air incursions and cross-Strait machinations. The on-the-ground violence in Hong Kong – the beatings of protesters by the Hong Kong police – however, became much more personalised and therefore, offered a more existential threat and as such the situation become more meaningful to the Taiwanese to an extent of 'this could happen to us.' As stipulated, with the situation in Hong Kong having settled somewhat and the direct threats from China not increasing beyond already known parameters, as long as the TPP iterates the "strong military" stance whilst simultaneously, "not seeking war though not being afraid to fight one" mantras, it will remain a strong and viable alternative to the DPP and KMT. Added to these factors, when the traditional major parties seem incapable of modifying their traditional views and the spectre of Hong Kong not having the influence it had in 2020, the TPP by definition has a strong chance of gaining the upper-hand and defeating the DPP. Should the TPP continue to resonate within Taiwanese society, and should its policies gain traction with younger voters in particular, the TPP will assuredly pick up many more votes, regardless of how subjective and prone to interpretation the term 'pragmatic' remains.

## **About the author**

Dr. Strobe Driver is an adjunct researcher with Federation University (Australia) and a freelance writer. As a continuum of his PhD in war studies, he has been focused on conflict, war, and terrorism and Asia-Pacific security with a particular emphasis on the rise of China. His book *The Brink of 2036: Why There Must Be a War in the Asia-Pacific* was released on January 5, 2024.

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