

Taiwan

Maverick mayor shakes up Taiwan politics

Opponents fear wildly popular Ko Wen-je will use Taipei role as springboard for the presidency



Ko Wen-je: 'As a professor at medical school, I was a kind of god and now I've fallen from heaven'

YESTERDAY by Ben Bland in Taipei

He has called protesting pensioners “bastards”, compared [Taiwan](#) and China to quarrelling lovers and said it is a “miracle” he has survived three years in office. But the blunt style of Ko Wen-je, the mayor of Taipei, has made him Taiwan’s most popular politician — and a possible presidential contender.

“Without me, the mass media cannot work in the night, because every station is discussing Ko Wen-je,” he tells the Financial Times at City Hall in the Taiwanese capital, dressed in his standard outfit of trainers, black trousers and short-sleeve shirt with a pen in the pocket. “Life is a bitter sea so why must you torture other people? If possible, try to make everyone happy.”

Combining the headline-grabbing antics of Boris Johnson with the avuncular approach of Bernie

Sanders, the 58-year-old former top surgeon has shaken up Taiwan's politics since being elected as an independent in 2014 with the backing of young people frustrated with the two dominant parties.

Now his opponents fear he will use the mayoralty of the capital as a springboard for higher office, following in the footsteps of two of the past three Taiwanese presidents and many world leaders, from Joko Widodo in Indonesia to Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey.

With an approval rating of about 70 per cent, Mr Ko is the most popular politician in Taiwan, according to You Ying-lung of the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation.

Syaru Shirley Lin, a political scientist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, says Mr Ko is tapping into the alienation of "a generation of young people who dislike and distrust the established political parties".



Ko Wen-je in front of an image of the Taipei skyline © Nicolle Liu/FT

The long-ruling Kuomintang, or Nationalist party, has fallen out of favour in Taiwan, which has de facto independence despite China's claim that it is part of its territory, after being seen as too close to Beijing and elite business interests. Meanwhile, the Democratic Progressive party, which swept to power last year under new President [Tsai Ing-wen](#), has struggled to live up to high expectations that it would push through economic and political reforms.

“As it gains power, the DPP is looking more and more like the KMT, with factionalism and a lack of ability to take on powerful elites within the party and more broadly,” says Ms Lin.

Mr Ko has exploited this frustration with the establishment to maximum effect, even though he has also co-operated with the DPP, which did not run a candidate against him in 2014. But he insists he is an accidental politician who only ran for mayor because he was being pushed out of his job at National Taiwan University for political reasons.

“As a professor at medical school, I was a kind of god and now I’ve fallen from heaven,” he says, laughing.

His abrasive style has upset civil servants and some voters in this city of 2.7m people. But his supporters praise his willingness to speak directly and try new approaches, from trying out driverless buses to refurbishing the city’s historic North Gate.

“He is the first boss I’ve had who didn’t want me to kiss his arse,” says one senior City Hall official. “He empowers us to take responsibility and try things out but if we screw up he will let us know.”

Ask Mr Ko about his biggest achievements and he is typically enigmatic. “I’m not a politician, I’m a philosopher,” he says before quoting Jesus: “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

As for his ambitions, he recently told the media pack that follows him everywhere that he has thought about the presidency but “only for three seconds”.

Before a possible presidential run in 2020, Mr Ko will face a re-election battle in Taipei next year.

Nathan Batto, a political scientist at Academia Sinica, a Taiwanese research institute, believes that whatever happens in the local election, Mr Ko would struggle in any presidential contest without a nationwide party or network to back him up.

He could also be tripped up by cross-strait relations, as the highest elected official to travel to China for talks since Beijing cut off formal communication channels with Ms Tsai’s government. Beijing, which has never ruled out taking Taiwan by force, has intensified the pressure on the island of 23m people since the election of Ms Tsai and her pro-independence party.

Mr Ko has tried to carve out a middle way between the DPP and KMT but has been attacked by independence supporters for promoting a Chinese-backed concert in Taipei and saying on a recent trip to Shanghai that China and Taiwan were like quarrelling lovers whose argument “begins at one end of the bed and is mended at the other”.

The mayor says that the current Taiwanese government is “not quiet enough” when it comes to China and that Taiwanese people need to lose some face to Beijing in order to protect their substantive independence.

He believes Beijing is facing much bigger external problems over North Korea and the South China Sea and that, if not antagonised, it will not focus on Taiwan.

But he is also thankful that Taiwan has a vibrant democracy, which is difficult for Beijing to overturn.

“Taiwan will not be Hong Kong,” he says, referring to the semi-autonomous Chinese territory that is increasingly being denied democratic freedoms by Beijing. “We passed the point of no return . . . on the road to democracy.”

Additional reporting by Nicolle Liu in Taipei

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