

TAIWAN ELECTIONS

Taiwan's Nationalists face battle to remain electoral force

Kuomintang's chairman steps down amid calls for radical party reforms

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A Kuomintang supporter attends a rally from the party's presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu in Taipei on Jan. 9. (Photo by Akira Kodaka)

TAIPEI -- Wu Den-yih, chairman of Taiwan's opposition Kuomintang, stepped down on Wednesday after the party's candidate suffered a crushing defeat in the island's presidential election.

The century-old Beijing-friendly party, which ruled the Chinese mainland before losing to the Communists in a civil war and moving its political base to Taiwan in 1949, now faces a battle to remain an electoral force.

The KMT, known in English as the Chinese Nationalist Party, has lost the last two presidential and legislative elections to President Tsai Ing-wen's China-skeptic Democratic Progressive Party. The KMT's toughest task may be to win back young voters, many of whom fear that Chinese President Xi Jinping could become more aggressive in seeking to unify Taiwan with the mainland.

"We should bring up a younger generation and make some radical changes. I see this election as big failure by the Kuomintang rather than a victory for the ruling DPP and President Tsai," Lo Chih-chiang, a 49-year-old KMT city councilor in Taipei who has initiated a party reform campaign, told the Nikkei Asian Review.

"The KMT has deviated from mainstream public opinion," Lo said. "We have also neglected the fact that U.S.-China relations have changed a lot these past few years and have failed to make adjustments to reflect these dynamics."



Kuomintang presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu speaks at a rally in Taipei on Jan. 9. Han lost heavily to President Tsai Ing-wen in Saturday's election. (Photo by Akira Kodaka)

The KMT's presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu, the mayor of the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung, only got 38.6% of the vote. Tsai, meanwhile, took 57.1% and received the highest number of votes since Taiwan's first direct presidential election in 1996. This is despite the KMT sweeping local elections in late 2018.

Seven KMT lawmakers and city councilors have already stepped down from posts on the party's Central Standing Committee. Their demands included the resignation of Wu, and the removal from parliament of a retired general who attended a speech by Xi in Beijing.

Tsai benefited in the election from public distrust of China, which refuses to rule out taking over the island by force and continues to push Taiwan to accept its "one country, two systems" framework. The recent unrest in Hong Kong, where pro-democracy activists have clashed with police since last June, also boosted the president's fortunes.

The 1992 consensus, agreed by the then KMT government and Beijing, states that Taiwan and China are both part of "one China" but leaves room for both sides to interpret what that means.

Pao Cheng-hao, a pro-KMT professor at Tamkang University, said the party needed to adjust its China policy.

"It should face the reality that what the 1992 consensus embraces is different from what Xi Jinping said [in an aggressive speech about Taiwan early last year]," Pao told Nikkei. "Those old men must go. A big cleanse is necessary for the KMT to revive."



Chiang Kai-shek, center, and other top Kuomintang officials walk from the Yuanshan Martyrs shrine in Taipei in this March 1955 photo. © AP

The origins of the KMT can be traced back to 1894 when Sun Yat-sen brought together Chinese activists in Honolulu. In 1912, Sun founded the Republic of China in Nanking (now Nanjing), a sovereign state that ruled most of the mainland until its base moved to Taiwan in 1949 under Chiang Kai-shek. At the time, the KMT had a close partnership with Washington in its fight against the Chinese Communist Party.

The KMT ruled the island with an iron fist during the "White Terror" period of repressive rule from 1949 to 1987, when martial law was lifted and gradual steps were taken to embrace democracy.

The DPP has won four of the seven direct presidential elections in Taiwan since 1996. Once seen by the U.S. as potentially harmful to Taiwan Strait stability because of its pro-independence stance, the DPP are now backed by Washington as it becomes more wary of China's global ambitions.

The KMT, however, are seen by some observers as leaning too closely toward China. For instance, Han visited Beijing's liaison offices in Hong Kong and Macao soon after being elected mayor of Kaohsiung in late 2018. He also became the first presidential candidate not to visit the U.S. after winning the party nomination.

Both the KMT and the DPP held large rallies in front of the presidential office building in Taipei in the days before the election. The demographic and ideological differences between the two parties and their supporters were clear.

Han's event was crowded with many middle-aged and older people singing songs from the 1980s and waving the flag of the Republic of China -- Taiwan's formal name and a symbol of the island's historical connection to the mainland. Tsai's rally, meanwhile, was packed with younger people waving pastel-shaded pink and green banners and singing pop songs in the Taiwanese dialect. Not a single ROC flag was on show.

"The KMT has become synonymous with being pedantic and not up to-date," said Yang Chih-dou, a 26-year-old party representative who attended an event calling for party reform on Sunday. "It's become something that the younger generation make fun of... young people like me feel ashamed to let friends know we are part of the KMT."



Former Taiwanese interior minister Lee Hong-yuan speaks with Nikkei at a rally for Kuomintang presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu in Taipei on Jan. 9. Lee said the KMT needed to redefine its relationship with China. (Photo by Andrew Sharp).

Lee Hong-yuan, 63, who served as interior minister under former President Ma Ying-jeou and is a professor at National Taiwan University, told Nikkei that the DPP's win was mostly due to events in Hong Kong. "The younger generation are very afraid that under the KMT Taiwan will become like Hong Kong. Unfortunately they bought this story. The young people blindly supported the DPP because they are afraid of China," said Lee.

Lee agreed that the KMT has to redefine its relationship with China and communicate better with the younger generation. "We have to think in a nontraditional way, because the old ways don't work anymore," he said.

Pan Chao-min, a professor at Tunghai University's Graduate Institute of Political Science in Taiwan, said that Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je's Taiwan People's Party, which won 11% of party votes in the legislature, is a rising force that cannot be ignored ahead of the next presidential vote in four years.

"Ko is definitely eyeing 2024 now that his party secured seats in the legislature. He's going to be a strong challenger against the ruling DPP next time," Pan told Nikkei. "As for the KMT, it will eventually be marginalized if it does not allow the younger generation to take more responsibility in the party."



Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je, leader of the Taiwan People's Party, is seen as likely to be a challenger in the 2024 presidential race (Photo by Ken Kobayashi).

The KMT has been slow to respond to modern social issues, such as same-sex marriage and human rights, and holds a vague stance on the Hong Kong protests.

"The party now needs to reflect on what has gone wrong as well as how the world has changed. Taiwan has changed, as has China, especially since the rise of Xi Jinping beginning in 2012," said Professor Thomas Gold at the University of California, Berkeley, who has observed Taiwanese elections since 1989.

"I will be very surprised if the KMT disappears; people started saying that in 1995 when small parties started to emerge. But it's still here," Gold told Nikkei. "Small parties have made even more progress in this election and the KMT really needs to reinvent itself and especially cultivate and promote much younger leaders."

Syaru Shirley Lin, political economist at University of Virginia and Chinese University of Hong Kong, said the KMT could rehabilitate itself.

"The DPP cannot take [Tsai's] landslide as a *carte blanche*" support from the people, Lin said, adding that the electorate included people who support unification or an economic alliance with China, as well as those who lost out in Tsai's economic reforms and conservatives who do not like her socially progressive policies.

"[Tsai's big victory] gives the KMT an excuse to restructure as every loss is an opportunity," she said.

Additional reporting by Andrew Sharp and Kenji Kawase.

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