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# CSD Background Study: Slow and Steady: Local Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Reform, 1946 – 1977

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2006

# Slow and Steady: Local Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Reform 1946 to 1977

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An understanding of elections, and in turn, of the democratic processes as a whole must rest partially on broad differentiations of the complexes of behavior that we call elections.

-V.O. Key. "A Theory of Critical Elections"

***Democratic transition in Taiwan has been an election-driven process.***<sup>1</sup>

- Hung-mao Tien & Tun-jen Cheng. "Crafting Democratic Institutions"

## Introduction

*Democracy* is one of the most contested concepts in political science, and often has normative connotations. As such, any assessment of a transition<sup>2</sup> to democracy will necessarily leave room for debate regarding the democratic status achieved by a particular country. Robert Dahl contends that there is a functional or procedural definition of democracy which consists of certain institutions and processes that must exist at some minimum level for a country to be considered democratic.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we can assess the degree to which a nation is procedurally democratic and detach that from the concept of democracy in the normative sense.

One of Dahl's indicators of a democracy is the existence of free and fair elections. As this case study will discuss,

the establishment and gradual expansion of Taiwan's local elections system goes hand-in-hand with its transition from what was essentially an authoritarian territory to what is largely considered a democratic success story today. Democratic reformers in Taiwan were able to use local elections to their advantage. Independent opposition candidates became familiar with the democratic process through elections for local government offices, and as the democratic movement grew stronger in Taiwan, opposition candidates were able to use their power to push for expanded access to government, the creation of a national opposition party, and ultimately free and fair elections for the National Assembly and the Presidency. Taiwan's transition to democracy was therefore largely assisted by the existence of local elections and the degree to which the electoral process was successful in allowing members of the democratic reform movement access to government.

While, for the sake of analysis, the democratic institutions required for a procedural democracy can be detached from the more normative conceptions, in reality, there would appear to be a very complex interplay between these procedural institutions and a population's commitment to democratic ideals. In Taiwan, political participation through local elections helped to instill a democratic ethos among the Taiwanese people. The institutions helped to bring dissenters together and shape expectations, attitudes and understanding among the Taiwanese people, who, in turn, went on to help shape and expand those same insti-

tutions. In tracing the history of this procedural element of democracy from its incipient stages at the local level, one can begin to understand the remarkable shift in perceptions that has led to an entrenchment of democratic values in Taiwan today.

### **The Importance of Elections to Democratic Transitions**

There are various democratic indicators that can be used to assess democratic progress. For instance, Freedom House's "Freedom in the World Survey"<sup>4</sup> quantitatively measures democratic attainment using various indicators grouped into broad categories of political rights and civil liberties. Civil liberties encompass values such as freedom of expression, belief and association; political rights encompass procedural measures such as the ability to participate in free and fair elections.

By most measures, an element of democratic progress includes a transition country allowing its citizens to participate in meaningful elections in which representatives are elected to the highest echelons of representative political office. Dahl argues that representation is an essential element of a democracy, and to have democracy in a meaningful sense, political institutions must be established and entrenched that facilitate this representation. Dahl points to elections (among other political and civil rights) as a necessary component of representation.<sup>5</sup> For elections to be considered democratic, they must allow for some degree of the following elements: dissent towards the government without fear of serious reprisal; power over determining national policy to be "constitutionally vested in elected officials"; the practice of free and fair elections with limited coercion of the electorate; and a franchise that allows practically all adults to vote for their representatives and also allows citizens a chance to run for elected office.<sup>6</sup>

In Taiwan, the evidence of democratic reform resulting from elections is clear. As Hung-mao Tien notes, the imposition of authoritarian, quasi-Leninist rule by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Republic of China (ROC) government in Taiwan took place in 1950. Within 46 years, limited local elections had been expanded to provincial elections, then to legislative elections at the national level and finally, in 1996, to the presidential elections.<sup>7</sup> Democratization in Taiwan was achieved largely through the electoral process, which allowed democratic reformers to voice dissent legitimately.

### **Local Elections in Taiwan: An Overview**

A series of democratic changes between 1945 and 1996 took Taiwan along a path towards democratization, culminating in the transition of power to the opposition party (the Democratic Progressive Party or DPP) in the 2000 presidential election. Although severely restricted and tampered with by the government of Chiang Kai-shek at their outset, local elections granted practically a universal franchise to Taiwan's citizenry which democratic reformers used to expand their influence within the government over time. Despite the fact that the ROC's political partisans (The Kuomintang or KMT party) dominated local elections for decades, the citizens of Taiwan were able to become familiar with the process of voting and electing local officials, which subsequently engrained the importance of an electoral timetable and instilled some expectations for governmental accountability within Taiwanese political culture.

As democracy emerged as a value within civil society through the 1960s and 1970s, local elections were used as a tool to push democratic reform through legitimate and peaceful means. Until the expansion of Taiwan's electoral system in the late 1970s, local elections remained the only sanctioned forum for political dissent in Taiwan. Local elections were initially established by the ruling KMT

to legitimate its governing status and consolidate its political support, both domestically and internationally. The KMT largely determined winning conditions by maintaining a significant degree of control over the electoral process. However, through top-down measures controlled by the KMT, democratic institutions and electoral measures were expanded over time. Nobody could have predicted where these controlled votes at the local level could lead, or how fast the changes would be, once the political system in Taiwan had begun to creak open.

This gradual democratic expansion resulted in increased accountability of the ruling KMT as well as the expansion of meaningful voter representation. Contemporary supporters of both the DPP and the KMT have suggested that there was a certain momentum to the election of opposition candidates; it was only when a greater number of non-KMT candidates were elected that the electorate truly began to believe that these politicians, who were outside the state party, could have the capacity to effect change. This gradual and emerging belief led to increased support for opposition candidates, further emboldening those in opposition to push for democratic change. A watershed election in 1977 propelled the opposition movement into serious political contenders, and with the gradual opening of the electoral system over time, the electoral reform process culminated in free and fair elections for the presidency in 1996, with a transfer of power from the KMT to the opposition (DPP) occurring in 2000.

Although local elections were dominated by the authoritarian KMT for decades, the opposition movement grew largely because of the access to government that local elections allowed independent candidates. In turn, the independent opposition (non-KMT) candidates used their positions within local governing bodies to voice dissent and push for greater access to higher government positions. And when elections for positions in the National Assembly and ultimately for the presidency were opened up,

democratic reformers were able to take advantage of the experience they had gained in running for office at the local level and, in many instances, to run strong and successful campaigns. Local elections were an essential precondition for democratic reform in Taiwan, as they encouraged meaningful and legitimate avenues for political dissent in Taiwan. Thus, as conditions for democratic reform (such as economic and social liberalization) became more widespread, and contestable elected positions were expanded after 1977, opposition candidates were able to use their experience in local government to run successful and co-ordinated campaigns based on national policy issues, and advocate for further democratic reform. Moreover, local elections created a voting culture in Taiwan with an electorate that maintained a respect for the democratic process.

### **Colonial Influence: Japan and the Establishment of Limited Local Elections in Taiwan**

To understand development, you have to understand tradition.<sup>8</sup> A significant component of Taiwan's history - or tradition - is of foreign rule and a lack of political freedom, both of which have been a major force in shaping Taiwanese development. Between 1895 and 1945, it was Japan that maintained Taiwan as a colony and, like their predecessors, helped to shape Taiwanese society.<sup>9</sup> Although one might not expect colonization to play a role in democratization, during the period of Japanese colonial occupation in Taiwan, limited local elections took place and also provided many Taiwanese with the experience of voting. According to analysis by Shelley Rigger, the Taiwanese democratic reform movement has its beginnings in the first significant movements for greater local autonomy, beginning in 1918 as a quiet resistance to Japanese control of Taiwan.

Various student and youth groups were inspired by the messages of Woodrow Wilson, calling for national self-determination and greater accountability for human rights standards. By 1921, the Taiwan Culture Society was created, which advocated for a Taiwanese Parliament to be used as a check on the authority of the Japanese colonial administration. The Taiwan Culture Society was successful in collecting approximately 17,000 signatures advocating for the creation of a Taiwanese Parliament between 1921 and 1934. By 1927, the Taiwan Culture Society had fragmented into several smaller groups; however, calls for home rule persisted on a smaller scale.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the Japanese administration established local elections by 1935, which were the first instances of political participation through elections for Taiwanese citizens.

Rigger argues that the Japanese colonial administration developed local elections as a means to divert reform movements from advocating for a separate Parliament to work within the existing administration, thus “reward[ing] elites who took a local rather than island-wide perspective, and... diminished incentives to join a united opposition.” And although voting was severely restricted and many local positions remained appointed by the central administration, “regular, peaceful political participation” occurred, and by 1939, over 300,000 Taiwanese were registered voters.<sup>11</sup> The elected local officials held very little power in comparison to the colonial administration and the franchise was limited to men with certain wealth and age restrictions. The offices of local officials were constrained and they dealt mainly with practical matters such as the discussion of local budgets, limited tax raising measures, and certain administrative issues.<sup>12</sup>

### **Lasting Institutions: The Japanese Electoral System in Taiwan**

In 1945, after approximately fifty years of colonization, Taiwan was returned to China following the defeat of Japan in the Second World War. Then, in 1949, after its de-

feat on the Mainland to Maoist forces, the Nationalist Party of the Republic of China (ROC) withdrew to Taiwan and established its national government on top of existing provincial and local governments.<sup>13</sup> Members of the ROC government’s central bodies continued to serve in their positions in Taiwan and claimed to continue to represent all of China.<sup>14</sup> The ROC continued its rule over Taiwan for another fifty years through the KMT’s domination of Taiwan’s political process.

The KMT built its government on top of existing political institutions; they were inclined to use local elections to their benefit to co-opt local elites and attempt to secure their authority and legitimize their outsider regime. Since the system of local elections was built using a Japanese model, they reflected certain peculiarities of the Japanese electoral system. The Japanese established an electoral model for local offices called the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, in which each citizen in a given electoral district has one vote, but districts elect multiple members.<sup>15</sup> The ROC incorporated the main elements of SNTV initiated by the Japanese, although they expanded the franchise universally for local elections and all positions were to be contested rather than having a certain percentage appointed by the government, as occurred under the Japanese system. This represented something of an anomaly under an authoritarian regime, in which elections are rarely legitimately contested at any level.<sup>16</sup>

Building on top of the existing Japanese system resulted in the continuous practice of electing local officials, but on a much larger scale. At the same time, many local elites who had gained some degree of power under the Japanese system remained political actors under the KMT regime.<sup>17</sup> The KMT was able to achieve success by co-opting these local elites to run as their candidates for local offices. The KMT encouraged competition between local elites within each electoral district by offering them political favours in return for loyalty to the KMT and the govern-

ment.<sup>18</sup> This system of patronage benefited the KMT under the SNTV system; it discouraged local elites from forming opposition parties or groups because several candidates were elected from each district. Therefore, local elites would compete against each other for KMT favouritism rather than against the KMT. The extent to which the fact of one-party rule was engrained in the consciousness of the Taiwanese people and the reality of the political process at this time cannot be understated. The KMT was the only party with any viable power and as such was the only party that, many believed, could offer any real opportunity to effect societal change, or provide a true choice for the electorate.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of an emerging “competition” at the local level during this period should also be viewed within the context of a deeply engrained system of one-party rule. Given the limited nature of the choice available, the bulk of the electorate would not even necessarily mentally equate “voting” with “democracy”. Rather, it was likely not until years later, after many societal controls had been lifted, that voting would come to be equated with the truly democratic conception of electoral “choice.”<sup>20</sup>

### **A Constitutional Dilemma: The Right to Vote?**

Sun Yat-sen is recognized as the founder of the Nationalist movement in China. Sun Yat-sen also developed constitutional principles describing democracy as an eventual goal.<sup>21</sup> The ROC Government adopted these principles, which became part of KMT doctrine in Taiwan. Rigger presents the following analysis of the implications of the ROC constitution to democracy in Taiwan:

“The constitution of the Republic of China is rooted in Sun Yat-sen’s three principles: nationalism, democracy and social welfare. In theory, then, the ROC state is a democracy. In practice, however, both in Taiwan before 1996 and on the Mainland before 1949, many of the constitu-

tion’s democratic provisions were ignored or overridden by emergency decrees.” Thus, the ROC state and Taiwan existed as “a system democratic in theory but authoritarian in practice.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the existence of democratic principles as outlined in the constitution and the promise of democracy as an eventual goal presented a problem of legitimacy for the KMT, both domestically and within the international community. Local elections were implemented by the KMT as a tool to demonstrate a certain degree of electoral openness while at the same time maintaining its heavy-handed control over Taiwan. The KMT stalled on its constitutional commitments, citing justifications of the rising Communist threat on the Mainland to institute martial law,<sup>23</sup> while still maintaining that democracy would be brought to the island through what can essentially be described as a benevolent dictatorship.<sup>24</sup>

On May 20, 1949, martial law was formally instituted by Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT constitution was suspended to allow the government to subvert democratic opposition movements effectively until the end of martial law in 1987 – but with diminishing success.<sup>25</sup> Importantly, the adherence to a goal of democratization in the KMT constitution created a sentiment among the electorate that democracy could be attained over time. Although it seemed that in many instances the KMT was reluctant to follow through on its democratic goals, the creation of local elections resulted in an expectation that free and fair elections would be expanded over time, and this became a rallying cry that would develop in reform movements over time.

The lip service paid to constitutional and democratic principles created a measure of respect for these ideals within the electorate, and therefore, some ideal of limited government became valued, even if at a basic level, by Taiwan’s political culture. Additionally, although most political freedoms were severely restricted, the KMT chose to

undertake measures to weed out state corruption, create mass education programs, and allow certain religious freedoms as well as tolerate academic debates about politics.<sup>26</sup>

The KMT chose to tie local elections into the ethos of constitutionalism, thus creating an electoral culture grounded in the principles of constitutional governance at some minimum level.<sup>27</sup> When the KMT instituted local elections, the party exploited Taiwanese desire for home rule. Rumours began to spread that elections at the executive level would eventually be opened up. However, the KMT was able to dodge the issue with the imposition of martial law in 1949 following the Maoist uprising on the Mainland.<sup>28</sup> There would be a constant tension in Taiwanese politics “between democracy and dictatorship” for years to come.

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### **Local Elections under the KMT: 1946-1971**

The first limited local elections under the KMT took place in 1946 with elections to the Provincial Consultative Assembly, in which approximately 1000 candidates contested 30 seats. Since at this time the ROC controlled the whole of China and Taiwan was a province within the ROC, the Provincial Consultative Assembly served as a means for Taiwan’s representation on the Mainland. The consultative assembly had no formal legislative authority, but it became a forum for voicing dissent towards the provincial administration.<sup>30</sup>

As noted above, the home rule movement had a relatively strong history in Taiwan and had significant importance to the Taiwanese public. Beginning in 1946, the KMT sought to tie into this movement and allow elections to take place at the local level, that is, for positions at the county, municipality (excluding mayoral positions in major centres such as Taipei), county municipality, borough, and neighbourhood levels. In 1950 (one year after the imposition of

martial law), fuller elections took place with balloting and direct elections occurring for these positions with voting rights granted universally to Taiwan’s electorate.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, by manipulating the home rule movement, at the political level, the KMT sought to “infiltrate Taiwan’s society and to expand its party network.”<sup>32</sup>

However, the elections at their outset and for several decades to come were hardly free and fair. So, by Dahl’s measurement, Taiwan’s early electoral system could not be classified as democratic. Contemporary academics have mused that corruption and bribery were commonplace.<sup>33</sup> Evidence from critics at the time also found a number of voting irregularities and voter intimidation at the polls, as well as the engineering of electoral outcomes to suit the KMT agenda. For example, Denny Roy points to an example of a high profile candidate standing for election in 1956. Hsu Hsin-Chih was a popular independent candidate who would have likely defeated his KMT opponent for the position of Taoyuan district magistrate. However, on the day before the election took place, Hsu was called to mandatory military service by the state, and thus removed from contention. However, even though such measures did occur, the KMT was prepared to ‘tolerate’ some electoral success of independent candidates, and many electoral successes were achieved under this system with independent opposition candidates winning roughly 1/4 to 1/3 of eligible local government seats over several elections.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, “the regime’s approach facilitated the KMT’s dominance over the important political issues and thus protected the core KMT agenda, while demonstrating that the government would permit a measure of pluralism.”<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, however, local elections were meaningful at many levels. Actual access to power could be achieved by opposition candidates, which is contrary to the concept of elections held under comparative authoritarian or Leninist regimes.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, local elections continued on an essentially uninterrupted timetable, pro-

viding the Taiwanese electorate with a consistent way to participate in political life. Although early elections had little to do with actual issues, they served a useful democratic purpose by allowing citizens to gain experience in casting a ballot on a regular schedule.<sup>37</sup> As evidence of this importance, voter turnout was consistently in the 80% range for the most important contests.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Importance of Local Elites**

As observed by the Japanese, Taiwan's local leaders wielded significant authority within Taiwanese society. Local gentry and landlords acted as a conservative, stabilizing force in Taiwan's rural areas, while business leaders maintained a similar role within Taiwan's urban centres. The KMT recognized this, and used local elections to bring these local elites into the governing party by offering them various favours that would benefit them financially and in reputation. The KMT was then able to use rural elites to implement a series of land reforms and business elites to undertake economic reform to enhance Taiwan's economic development, while maintaining political stability at the same time. Throughout its development, Taiwan maintained a relatively successful economic growth policy, and thus continued to benefit from the support of local elites.<sup>39</sup>

Because the KMT was essentially an outsider regime from the Chinese Mainland, it was concerned with establishing and maintaining its legitimacy in Taiwan. The KMT would use local elections to gain the support of local elites and local factions by offering favours in exchange for party loyalty. More than simple payoffs, the KMT implemented a sophisticated system of patronage to reward these individuals for their loyalty. For rural elites, the KMT provided favourable agricultural loans and created national land policies that benefited landlords. For business elites, the KMT offered contracts for government services, including the control of natural monopoly corporations like transportation, cooperative banks, and gas corporations. Elites were offered positions within local government bodies to

enhance their economic and political interests in exchange for partnership with the KMT.<sup>40</sup>

The KMT practice of co-opting local elite into the party and into the political process would frequently extend to Taiwan's youth, via the school system. Up until the late-1980s, each campus would have a military training cell as well as a 'KMT club' that most bright, young people would join. Chiang Ching-kuo was himself head of the 'KMT Youth Elite', and it was suggested by former student activist Jou Yi-Cheng that almost everyone who joined the KMT party in the 1980s had served in the youth organization.<sup>41</sup>

The creation of a system of patron-client relationships with local elites allowed the KMT to ensure that, "with time, both the political and economic interests of local elites became intertwined with the regime, bolstering its legitimacy."<sup>42</sup> By co-opting local elites, the KMT was able to sideline opposition candidates from power, while at the same time expanding its influence and power at the local level, thus enhancing the regime's stability.

In addition, the KMT pitted rival factions against each other to compete for KMT candidacy, rather than against the KMT itself.<sup>43</sup> Because local elites wanted to gain access to KMT power networks, they would be encouraged to compete against rival elites to demonstrate who was the most loyal to the KMT in order to win nominations. As the Taiwanese economy grew throughout the 1960s, the business elite began competing more often for KMT nominations, in order to facilitate their economic interests. The state remained powerful enough, for a time, to keep business elites in check and maintain its political authority. However, as Taiwan's economy became increasingly successful, economic liberalization measures would eventually challenge this relationship.<sup>44</sup>

More than co-opting local elites, the state was initially successful in bringing social movements within the KMT



fold. The KMT restricted dissent and punished organizations that opposed its rule outside of the sanctioned local elections system, and incorporated societal groups such as labour, student organizations, professionals, farmers, state employees and journalists within the KMT party structure.<sup>45</sup> Thus, if one wanted to participate in social organizations, in most cases, access could only be achieved through participation within the party, allowing the KMT to control virtually all sectors of civil society.<sup>46</sup>

The KMT was particularly successful in co-opting the various aboriginal groups into the party structure. Throughout KMT rule, the state party could expect political support, at all levels of government, from well over 90% of the aboriginal population. In interviews with two aboriginal elite, it was suggested that the level of control enjoyed by the KMT during this time was the result of: the entrenched system of political patronage, KMT policies that sought to improve the living conditions of aboriginal people, and the simple fact that, for many years, the party was the state – any rapid change could only be effected through the vehicle of the state party.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Role of Opposition Movements in Local Elections**

The KMT banned organized opposition parties and therefore, at the outset of local elections and continuing through the 1950s and 1960s, few independent candidates posed a serious challenge to the KMT's hold on local governing institutions. Non-KMT candidates were forced to run as independents and only on local issues, as formal opposition parties were banned by the KMT. Independent local candidates could not be connected to a larger opposition movement and could not run on national policy issues. Therefore, criticism of the government had a difficult time gaining momentum and the mobilization of the electorate around national public policy issues was essentially impossible.

Furthermore, non-KMT candidates were at a severe disadvantage because they could not engage in illicit practices such as vote-buying or offering political favours because the KMT maintained a monopoly on political power. Additionally, because independent candidates could not organize, they lacked the resources to mount effective campaigns. Although independent candidates were at a significant disadvantage, candidates did attain significant measures of success in many cases. For instance, throughout the period of 1959 to 1971, independent candidates won approximately 25-33% of the total of local government seats in each election.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the KMT effectively outlawed all critical political demonstrations. In what came to be known as the February 28 Incident, in 1947, KMT forces brutally repressed a protest by Taiwanese dissidents, killing a number of protestors who clashed with security forces. The KMT banned further protests because of its fear of future uprisings and social unrest, and insisted that local elections would be the only legitimate means to oppose the KMT.<sup>49</sup> This measure limited popular protest; however, it institutionalized and legitimized dissent within Taiwan's electoral process.

KMT policies would thus unwittingly serve to consolidate many of the diffuse voices of social and political activists, through the vehicle of local elections. The life experience of Minister Yao provides an interesting example of the unintentional impact of KMT policies in this regard. Before becoming a political leader in the 1970s, Yao Chia-Wen had little interest in "democracy," but rather was engaged in issues of social justice. The only way to speak openly, however, was to volunteer during election campaigns, where a small amount of free speech was permissible. Yao saw, at the time, that the only way to effect social or legal change was through the limited venue of local politics. The future Minister, and many of his peers, would come together through local elections, to advocate for changes within Taiwanese society.<sup>50</sup>

Local elections thus provided avenues for political reformers to gain experience within the Taiwanese political system, and although they did not possess a significant degree of authority initially, as the democratic reform movement gained strength over time, the experience gained by local candidates enabled the reform movement to achieve significant electoral victories in subsequent elections for higher offices. Opposition movements were not able to make many inroads into the public policy domain throughout the first two-and-a-half decades of local elections under the KMT. However, beginning in the early-to-mid 1970s, calls for democratic reform became louder, and as independent candidates became increasingly successful over time, increased electoral participation was observed. Thus, the democratic reform movements were able to expand their influence using local elections based on the recognition that “elections provided a consistent and relatively safe mechanism for expanding their influence.”<sup>51</sup>

Although elections were limited to the local levels of government and were dominated by the KMT, it is important to note that even in their early stages, local elections played a considerable role in democratic reform in Taiwan. Elections, even if limited to the local levels of governance, have the effect of “familiarizing citizens with the concept of a participatory political culture.”<sup>52</sup> Local offices had significant importance for the Taiwanese public. Through control of these offices, Taiwan’s electorate was able to shape public policy on certain levels, including the ability to maintain local security forces and direct elements of local welfare systems.<sup>53</sup>

Local elections were initiated by the KMT and sold to the electorate as a step towards gradual democratic expansion. As a ruling party with authoritarian status, the KMT dominated the electoral process and used elections as a means to consolidate its power at the local level. Local elections did not significantly affect the KMT’s political dominance initially; however, the gradual opening of

higher political offices to elections over time (particularly in the 1970s and 1980s) resulted in increased organized competition for the KMT in subsequent elections. Ultimately, electoral experience “provided opposition forces with institutional channels for organizing the people and promoting political socialization.”<sup>54</sup>

### **International Pressures: 1970s and Beyond**

As democratic and electoral reforms were being called for internally, external pressures also began to mount. International forces would come to influence the pace and content of democratization in Taiwan by encouraging electoral reform and emboldening the opposition, in a host of different ways. First, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwan began to fall out of favour with the international community, losing its seat in the United Nations, losing official recognition with the United States and having its diplomatic relations with Japan cut off.<sup>55</sup> As the ROC became increasingly diplomatically isolated, the KMT was forced to turn inwards to gain greater support from the Taiwanese people; Bih-jaw Lin, a professor of diplomacy at National Chengchi University describes this period as one of intense soul searching for the Taiwanese.<sup>56</sup> In an effort to bolster its international standing, the KMT also sought to demonstrate to its foreign allies the differences between the ROC and the Mainland Communist regime. Elections were thus used for posturing within the international community to distinguish the “democratic” China from the Communist China.<sup>57</sup>

Opposition members were provided with further impetus for change in the 1970s and 1980s, as many reformers returned to Taiwan, armed with foreign educations and a host of fresh ideas on liberal democracy and its interplay with the electoral process. Travel between Taiwan and the Mainland in the 1980s for more economic purposes would also serve to reinforce a democratic ethic among the Taiwanese; as Taiwan’s citizens were able to compare their

communities with those on the Mainland, they allegedly gained a greater appreciation for the differences and a stronger sense of wanting to solidify their choice in government.<sup>58</sup>

### **The Rise of the Opposition Movement: 1971 to 1977**

Although throughout this period, local elections were dominated in most cases by the KMT, the possibility of gaining incremental victories in some high profile electoral contests encouraged opposition politicians to work within the existing political system to push for democratic reform. Independent candidates began to be respected by the Taiwanese electorate, and their influence was enhanced through subsequent elections. Local elections, therefore, had further unintended consequences for the KMT, in which momentum from the successes of independent candidates pushed the KMT to adopt greater measures of democratic reform.<sup>59</sup>

As local elections continued through the 1970s, they became engrained within the political consciousness of the Taiwanese, making it very difficult to cancel elections even as opposition candidates became more successful over time. An electoral calendar became part of the Taiwanese political process as early as the Japanese occupation, and created an expectation among the Taiwanese citizenry for regular elections. Additionally, KMT candidates and local elites increasingly relied on their electoral success to gain patronage, and thus would also be troubled if electoral access were reversed. The KMT was, essentially, stuck with the system it created.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, martial law and political restrictions began to be questioned over time. The existence of democratic principles within the KMT constitution - and the promise that they would one day be fulfilled - rang increasingly hollow to the electorate as the decades passed.

Each passing election increased the calls for democratic reform as participation became increasingly valued both by the KMT and opposition movements – by the KMT to maintain control through the continued co-optation of local elites, and by the opposition movements through the enhancement of the reform message as well as the desire for increased representation. Thus opposition candidates were able to rally around the unfairness of local elections and push for greater access to higher positions and to encourage various democratic reforms. Despite periodic government crackdowns of dissidents, the scope of contestable elections expanded over time.<sup>61</sup>

Social movements also gained strength through the 1960s and 1970s. Resistance to KMT policies grew on several fronts, including opposition from business groups, political reformers, various magazines, environmental groups, as well as several other social organizations. These organizations were able to use the experience gained through local elections to mount campaigns and run candidates supportive of their causes. Although the candidates remained independents and were isolated and disbursed throughout Taiwan, these efforts constituted the first instances of an organized opposition within the electoral system. So, as the KMT used local elections to subvert and suppress opposition movements, and as these movements gained strength, they learned to utilize elections in their favour. Therefore, “the state, confronted with the challenges and pressures of political democratization, economic liberalization, and social movements, lost considerable control over society.”<sup>62</sup>

With the death of Chiang Kai-shek, his son and successor, Chiang Ching-kuo, pushed through certain reforms dealing with good governance such as anti-corruption measures, and economic liberalization through the early 1970s.<sup>63</sup> With increased pressure to reform, the KMT experienced a legitimacy crisis throughout the 1970s. As economic prosperity increased, so did calls for increased

market liberalization. Changing socio-economic trends such as increased living standards, greater access to education, and mass communication increased calls for social openness, civic participation, and ultimately democratic reform. As growing middle classes began to mobilize, a gradual undermining of KMT authority occurred. The KMT had to undertake democratic reforms to maintain its legitimacy by expanding electoral contests to certain provincial and national seats in 1972.<sup>64</sup> It should be noted, however, that at the time, the KMT maintained a strong grip on the electoral system, and also was well positioned to contest and win in elections at any level due to the support system it had created for itself over the decades it remained in power.<sup>65</sup>

Co-opting local factions was an effective strategy to win elections at the local level. However, as elections began to open up for wider contests across regions and competition widened to the provincial and national levels of government, this strategy proved less effective for the KMT. Opposition movements began to campaign on broader issues, became increasingly organized and connected, and would be able to appeal to increasingly larger bases of support. Campaigns dealing with regional or national issues would decrease the relevance of local factions, and patronage would have less of an effect. An essential dilemma for the KMT was its use of repression and accommodation in terms of democratic movements, in which too much of either method of control posed a threat to the KMT's legitimacy. Ultimately, this dilemma would cause the opposition to make significant inroads to political control.<sup>66</sup>

### **A Critical Election: The Tangwai Movement, 1977**

V.O. Key observes that "critical elections" occur when previous electoral patterns suddenly give way to a new political consensus, which persists for several subsequent elec-

tions.<sup>67</sup> Taiwan's local and provincial elections of 1977 can be described in such a manner. While the momentum for change had been building for decades, it was perhaps this critical election that would set the stage for the "ocean of change" that would occur in Taiwan throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>68</sup>

Opening seats at the national level failed to curtail calls for democratic reform. Rather, the improved access had the opposite effect, in which opposition candidates were able to campaign across electoral districts with broader issue-based campaigns. Thus, these expanded elections "provided fertile ground for the development of an opposition party."<sup>69</sup> The opposition movement became increasingly organized, and a watershed moment in Taiwanese electoral politics occurred in 1977 – in which the opposition movement (known as the Tangwai, or "outside the party") achieved record electoral success in various contests. The KMT maintained its majority, but did lose ground to opposition candidates on many fronts. So, in 1977, "local elections and the limited opening of representative bodies to electoral competition expanded the opposition's political leverage and ability to mobilize," and effectively reduced the KMT's influence from that moment onward.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, because of their experience with local elections, the Tangwai movement and its candidates were able to exploit the electoral system to which they had grown accustomed and use their experience to their advantage.<sup>71</sup>

The reforms that brought on the electoral success in 1977 and in future years marked a shift from "hard to soft authoritarianism".<sup>72</sup> The 1977 elections were the first to be seriously contested by an opposition movement (although it did not become an official party until 1986, when the state allowed the formation of the Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP). The Tangwai movement was able to rally modest, but better than expected support behind national policy issues that the previous local electoral system prohibited. Eventually, the DPP would hone its national mes-

sage and would come to represent key wedge issues such as independence from China as well as important social welfare issues.

As discussed at the outset, there was a certain momentum to the election of opposition candidates. It was only after a more substantial number of opposition candidates were elected that the electorate truly began to believe that individuals outside of the state party could effect change, and that genuine “choice” was conceivable. The institutions of local elections would slowly begin to alter the democratic perceptions and expectations of the Taiwanese people.

The success of Taiwanese Tangwai candidates marked a shift in Taiwanese electoral and political history. Better than expected success was achieved at the local and provincial levels with several non-KMT candidates winning important seats. Although the KMT maintained its majority position for approximately two more decades, “after 1977, the KMT never recovered its electoral monopoly; it never regained its pre-1977 seat share, and each subsequent contest intensified the pressure for change.”<sup>73</sup>

In one particular instance, a popular Tangwai candidate for county magistrate named Hsu Hsin-liang utilized Western campaign methods to achieve electoral success. Hsu employed student volunteers and mounted a professional campaign using posters and advertisements combined with dramatic speeches about public policy issues. With the experience he had gained in electoral politics due to the exposure of local elections, Hsu was able to score a significant victory against a well-known KMT candidate. This success and others like it stimulated the opposition movement.<sup>74</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight the election of 1977 has been viewed as a watershed moment in Taiwan’s transition to democracy. The political momentum seems unstoppable. Political partisans experiencing these changes at the time,

however, did not have this futuristic perspective, and several reported being truly shocked at the speed and extent of the resulting political changes in the 1980s. Ma Lai Ku Mai was a member of the KMT government at the county level at the height of the opposition movement. When Mr. Ku Mai and other local politicians learned of the movement they simply could not believe how much chaos there was at the upper levels of government and how much the KMT had lost control.<sup>75</sup> King-yuh Chang was likewise surprised when the opposition movement consolidated itself into the DPP; the KMT allegedly thought that Taiwan already had a form of democracy, as elections were being held and the Constitution was, in their view, being followed.<sup>76</sup>

#### **After 1977: Repression and the way Forward**

It must be noted that the reform movement did not experience smooth sailing after the critical election of 1977. In fact, the KMT continued to impose martial law throughout the decade, and used violent repression tactics to try to destabilize the Tangwai movement. By the end of 1978, the United States renewed its relations with the ROC in Taiwan, and thus, the KMT argued that it could not risk political instability at such an important juncture. As such, the KMT undertook a series of repressive measures towards the opposition movement, including the cancellation of elections scheduled for December of that year.

Following the cancellation, scheduled protests organized by the Tangwai movement occurred in January 1979. These acts of civil disobedience led to the arrest of several opposition leaders, a crackdown on opposition candidates, and the murder of a Tangwai leader’s family by unknown assailants. These events ultimately brought condemnation from the international community, as well as human rights watch groups such as Amnesty International. Elections were eventually rescheduled, as the costs of continued repression became too great for the KMT party, who risked losing its support and legitimacy within the international com-

munity and its own electorate. Ultimately, the moderate wings of the Tangwai movement gained strength and were able to push for greater democratic reforms over the subsequent decades.<sup>77</sup>

The population began to grow critical of the regime's suppression of political reform and pointed to Sun Yat-sen's constitutional principles which advocated for democracy. The KMT was able to resist calls for further reform for a time, but as the voices of the opposition movement grew louder, the KMT faced problems of legitimacy in which the continued use of martial law encouraged opposition forces to insist that the regime was fundamentally undemocratic and did not intend to extend real political power to the electorate. It eventually became necessary for the KMT to make concessions to maintain its political legitimacy in Taiwan.<sup>78</sup>

In *Polyarchy*, Dahl contends that the likelihood of success for a country undergoing a democratic transition increases as the cost of suppression for the state rises, and therefore, the costs of toleration for political opposition decline as well.<sup>79</sup> At the juncture of the elections of 1977 and the subsequent crack down on the opposition movement in early 1979, the costs of political suppression became extremely high for the KMT as it began to lose legitimacy domestically and internationally. If the KMT continued with its crackdown on dissidents, it risked losing the international legitimacy and recognition it had just reclaimed, and furthermore, risked alienating the Taiwanese electorate, who had become accustomed to the gradual increase of democratic freedoms as well as an expectation for elections on a predictable timetable.

Further acts of civil disobedience and political mobilization in the early 1980s would not result in any excessively harsh reactions by the KMT. Rather, the ruling party chose to send in negotiators to contend with the dissidents. Some within the opposition movement saw the lack of force as a

weakness and were emboldened to push for further reform.<sup>80</sup> Within several years, the DPP would come together as a formal political party and the floodgates of political opposition would be opened wide.

Significant democratic reforms continued throughout the end of the 1970s and later into the 1980s and 1990s. The experience gained by opposition candidates and organizers through participation in local elections allowed the opposition movement the ability to quickly increase its share of political power as restrictions were gradually lifted. At the same time, the practice of local elections enabled and created a culture of voting among Taiwan's citizenry, who came to respect and value democratic participation.

Local elections, therefore, contributed to the political socialization of the Taiwanese electorate.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the democratic reform movement strengthened over time in relation to the increasing respect for and influence of elected positions. So, when conditions for reform were presented, opposition forces were able to capitalize on their electoral experience and were able to translate that into increasing success at the polls. Finally, the KMT allowed the Tangwai movement to form a political party in 1986 called the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and rescinded martial law in 1987. Subsequently, the DPP reached parity with the KMT in terms of electoral success by the late 1990s and ultimately won the presidency in 2000.<sup>82</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Gradual Approach to Democratic and Electoral Reform**

Taiwan's electoral experience can provide lessons for democratic reform in certain authoritarian states. Democratic and electoral reform can be viewed as having proceeded in a top-down manner, with gradual reforms being tolerated by the KMT over time, through the expansion of voting rights and contestable elected positions between 1946 and 1996. Over this fifty-year period, the KMT

instituted limited local elections that were gradually expanded over time and particularly after 1970 as the KMT's political monopoly became increasingly difficult to sustain.<sup>83</sup> The political institutions for local elections would help to instil within the Taiwanese people a democratic ethos that would ultimately become entrenched in subsequent decades.

As Thomas Carothers notes, Taiwan's experience with political reform is quite rare. Carothers notes that, broadly speaking, there are two main paths for democratic reform under authoritarian regimes. The first method sees the authoritarian regime collapse due to a lack of legitimacy through popular uprisings, revolutions, or similar overthrows of dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. The second path takes place when the authoritarian regime gradually releases control over the state through liberalization initiatives, in which social, economic, and political reforms are expanded in a manageable way and the goal of consolidated democracy is eventually achieved.

Electoral reform in Taiwan represents the latter and rarer case, "in which the dictatorial regime gradually changes its stripes and left power through an electoral process." Carothers observes this process has only occurred in a small number of countries including Taiwan, Chile, Mexico, and to some degree South Korea (which combined gradual reform but experienced political unrest to a significant degree). Usually, as Carothers notes, attempted transitions to democracy are defined by the first path – "the crash of the incumbent dictatorial regime."<sup>84</sup>

The crash of the KMT did not occur in Taiwan's democratic transition and it remains essentially on par with the DPP in terms of its electoral success. Carothers observes that in successful gradualist transitions, certain preconditions exist within given countries that contribute to relatively stable democratic reform. As in Taiwan's case, a strong record of economic success, the growth of an educated

middle class, and economic liberalization contributed to a relatively stable civil society, creating vested interests in Taiwan's continued economic growth and therefore, in its social stability. According to Carothers, economic success also moderates the opposition movement to a certain degree, which sidelines extremist factions, "therefore giving the ruling elite the self-confidence to keep moving toward greater political openness."<sup>85</sup>

The KMT maintained that it was committed to gradual political openness once certain preconditions were met, such as a certain degree of economic stability and land reform measures. The KMT was caught in the middle of a political balancing act, in which economic prosperity achieved under its reign increased its prestige, but at the same time, encouraged greater economic, social, and political liberalization, particularly among an increasingly educated and wealthy middle class.<sup>86</sup> The KMT saw material prosperity as a prerequisite for political reform beyond local elections, and utilized martial law and political repression to ensure that reform occurred according to its ideals.<sup>87</sup> However, it appears that pressure for change from the electorate overtook the unspecified timetable for democratic reform enforced by the KMT.

Carothers' second feature of gradual democratic reforms is the occurrence of that reform through largely legitimate political means – particularly through the electoral process.<sup>88</sup> Local elections and their gradual expansion to more important elected offices were critical to the success of Taiwan's democratic transition. Although initial elections were dominated and outcomes were engineered by the ruling KMT, their acceptance of the results and consistent victories from opposition candidates ensured the continued legitimacy of the process. The KMT allowed for opposition candidates to voice dissent through this process in an orderly way that was, at the same time, acceptable to and tolerated by the state.

Therefore, the opposition movement was able to strengthen its power through continued electoral participation, and at the same time, this tolerated forum for dissent was engrained within the Taiwanese political process and among the electorate. Taiwan can therefore serve as a model for gradual democratic reform for other countries with similar characteristics. Carothers is correct to note that gradual democratic reform has been successful in only a handful of cases. Taiwan possessed all of the right preconditions for democratic reform to occur in a gradual and relatively stable process – namely economic success and the growth of an educated middle class, and a system of local elections that allowed legitimate political dissent through an organized process.

## Notes

- 1 Hung-mao Tien & Tun-jen Cheng, "Crafting Democratic Institutions," *Democratization in Taiwan: Implications for China* (Hong Kong, Basingstoke, New York: Hong Kong University Press, 1999).
- 2 The concept of democracy is, in fact, so value laden that even its surrounding terminology can create impassioned debate. In interviews with members of the Taiwan Institute of Economic Research, it was suggested that it might be more appropriate to call Taiwan's democratization process a "transformation," rather than a "transition." It was believed by one interviewee that the term "transition" may put too much of a focus on certain watershed moments. Changes in Taiwan should, more accurately, be viewed in light of the entire process, as a complex and cumulative series of events. (See Appendix B)
- 3 Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
- 4 Freedom House is a "non-partisan and broad based" NGO founded in 1941 to promote democratic values abroad. Freedom House believes that "American leadership in international affairs is essential to the cause of human rights and freedom." Among Freedom House's publications is the *Freedom in the World* survey. This annual survey measures various indicators of freedom in different countries to develop an overall score indicating the level of freedom of a given nation. For more information, visit [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).
- 5 Dr. Yun-han Chu, a prominent academic in Taiwan, has reached similar conclusions with respect to some of the "necessary" (if not sufficient) conditions for state building. Dr. Chu has opined that basic, functioning bureaucratic structures are required, as is some form of local governance. Local elections in Taiwan, of course, preceded its formal "democracy" by over 40 years. (See Appendix B)
- 6 Robert Dahl, "A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation," *Political Science Quarterly* 109.1 (Spring 1994).
- 7 Hung-mao Tien, "Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Development," *Taiwan's Electoral Politics and Democratic Transition: Riding the Third Wave*, ed. Hung-mao Tien (USA: East Gate Books, M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 1996).
- 8 These were the words of Minister Yao Chia-Wen, in discussions on Taiwan's transition to democracy, in July of 2005. Minister Yao has gained unique perspectives on Taiwan, both as a social leader in the 1970s and as a political prisoner in



- the 1980s. Throughout his incarceration, the Minister read extensively and was able to truly reflect on, among other things, Taiwan's history and society. (See Appendix B)
- 9 Minister Jinn-Rong Yeh has opined that Taiwan is "unique" among all the forces that have tried to change the country over the years. It is perhaps because of its history with foreign leadership that Taiwan continues to struggle to find its own unique culture. The quest for a truly "Taiwanese" identity was a recurring theme throughout discussions with academics, politicians and activists in Taiwan in July of 2005. (See Appendix B)
- 10 Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy* (London: Routledge Press, 1999) 35-37.
- 11 Rigger 38.
- 12 George H. Kerr, *Formosa: Licensed Revolution and the Home Rule Movement: 1895-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974) 169.
- 13 The initial excitement of the Taiwanese with respect to this change quickly dissipated when the population realized that the KMT leaders would be even more repressive than their Japanese predecessors. Dr. Lung-chu Chen provided a rather telling slogan from the time: "The dogs are gone, but the pigs have been traded in." (See Appendix B)
- 14 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh & Emerson M S Niou, "Salient Issues in Taiwan's Electoral Politics," *Electoral Studies* 15.2 (1996).
- 15 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "The SNTV System and its Political Implications," *Taiwan's Electoral Politics* 193-195.
- 16 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "SNTV."
- 17 Rigger 39.
- 18 Rigger 22.
- 19 See Appendix B.
- 20 See Appendix B, p. 32; *Interview with Johnny Chiang*.
- 21 Denny Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) 79.
- 22 Rigger 59.
- 23 It is interesting to note how pervasive the argument justifying the imposition of martial law over four decades is, particularly among those with some prior affiliation with the former KMT regime. In interviews conducted in July of 2005, the extensive tenure of military rule by the KMT was still justified as having been necessary due to the military and communist threat from the Mainland. (See Appendix B)
- 24 Yangsun Chou & Andrew Nathan, "Democratizing Transition in Taiwan," *Asian Survey* 27.3 (1987).
- 25 Chyuan-Jeng Shiau, "Elections and the Changing State-Business Relationship," *Taiwan's Electoral Politics and Democratic Transition*.
- 26 Steven J. Hood, *The Kuomintang and the Democratization of Taiwan* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) 29.
- 27 Steve Tsang, "Transforming a Party State into a Democracy," *Democratization in Taiwan: Implications for China*.
- 28 Christian Schafferer, *The Power of the Ballot Box: Political Development and Election Campaigning in Taiwan* (USA: Lexington Books, 2003) 34.
- 29 Rigger 65.
- 30 Lai Tse-han, Ramon Myers & Wei Wou, *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947* (USA: Stanford University Press, 1991) 69.
- 31 Schafferer 85-88.
- 32 Schafferer 33.
- 33 See Appendix B. *Interviews with King-yuh Chang; and Yunhan Chu*.
- 34 Roy 86.
- 35 Roy 87.
- 36 Tun-jen Cheng, "Democratizing the Quasi-Leninist Regime in Taiwan," *World Politics* 41 (July 1989).
- 37 Rigger 18-19.
- 38 James A. Robinson, "China's Local Elections in Contrast with Taiwan's," *Taipei Times* 1 February 2000.
- 39 John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "Elections," 210.
- 40 Hsieh, "Elections," 215-218.
- 41 See Appendix B, p. 25.
- 42 Tien, "Elections and Taiwan's Democratic Development," 8.
- 43 Roy 86.
- 44 Shiau, "Elections," 219.
- 45 The-fu Huang, "Elections and the Evolution of the Kuomintang," *Taiwan's Electoral Politics and Democratic Transition* 108.