

Explaining Taiwan's structural politicization

This book has taken the reader on a journey through the events and structural shifts that occurred as a consequence of Taiwan's first real power transition, one that was not completed simply by the old ruling party turning over the formal reins of government to the new ruling party. Taiwan's gradual process of democratization has been celebrated as one of the most successful cases of political transformation. But the very incremental nature of ceding power, contrasting with the more drastic nature of change in Eastern Europe, has heightened politicization on the island. The DPP's 'accidental' 2000 presidential election victory ushered in a political showdown waged in subsequent elections, in the legislature as well as in the streets through political mass mobilization, as the new government tried to dismantle the bases of the KMT's power and the old political elite fought back.

In the context of predominantly ethnically Chinese societies, Taiwan's democratization process has been a unique experience. The process has, as one would expect, attracted the attention of people outside the island, given the potential implications for democratization prospects in the Greater China area. Taiwan's political transformation has also been noteworthy because of the rather unusual nature of the process. Instead of making an abrupt break with its authoritarian past, democracy developed in an evolutionary manner from within a one-party state, with that 'one party' still largely intact and powerful. There was no radical disjuncture with the past, nor did blood flow on the streets. The process was hailed as a model for others to emulate. However, even as Taiwan managed to effect an initially smooth political transition, the unfinished nature of this transition has served to make it much more protracted, with adverse consequences, such as political gridlock. Above all, the intense politicization of

society has brought about a decrease in social trust, a general lack of trust in political institutions and a loss of faith in representative democracy.¹

Political transitions are seldom painless. In the case of the democratization of political systems that lack prior experience with democracy, transitions tend to be both long and turbulent. It should not be surprising that Taiwan's great political transition is proving to be more protracted and less certain than initially thought, perhaps partly because it was at first so smooth and bloodless. The great challenge to the long-term viability of Taiwan's democratic experiment is to break out from the plight of structural politicization that is eating at the foundations of its representative democracy.

The book has systematically developed a surprisingly unresearched area, namely the empirical study of intensely politicized societies (structural politicization). I have illuminated the structural origin of Taiwan's intense politicization, focusing on informal political structures rather than on formal political institutions. There is no shortage of scholars who have argued that the semi-presidential constitutional arrangements adopted in Taiwan promote political gridlock, or that the electoral system is deeply flawed and gives rise to factionalism. I do not directly challenge these assertions. Institutional features such as semi-presidentialism, the SNTV election system and a partisan media, for example, certainly contribute to society's politicization. Nonetheless, focusing exclusively on institutional flaws is clearly inadequate.

My argument has been that the fundamental reasons for the intense politicization of Taiwanese society lie deeper, that the latent politicization became far more visible during the DPP's eight years as governing party, and that institutional arrangements mainly exacerbate the problem. I maintain that Taiwan's intense politicization stems from five structural features: an incremental political transition (transition interregnum); a constitution that enables a power split between two political teams (semi-presidentialism); Taiwan's geopolitical 'tornness' (asymmetric integration); strong vested interests and related political cleavage (the patronage state); and a social structure that facilitates political mobilization (nested pyramid structures).

Separately, these factors do not necessarily result in intense politicization. Semi-presidentialism can work decently with a consensus-seeking political culture. A torn society will not descend to vicious fighting as long as the political cleavage does not harden into a confrontational partisan bifurcation. Neither does simply having social structures conducive to political mobilization necessarily result in a very politicized society. And if a one-party system crumbles quickly, old vested interests may not have the opportunity to entrench themselves in

the new transitional system. However, in conjunction with each other they can produce an explosive mix. It is the interplay of all these factors – the one-party era political cleavage, flawed political system, geopolitical uncertainty, vested interests and easily mobilized social networks – that we need to look at to grasp Taiwan's structural politicization. Ultimately, all of these relate back to one underlying root cause: the legacy of the one-party state.

AFTER THE PARTY

An old adage states that power is not given, it is taken. The Taiwanese political transition process makes it painfully clear how hard it is to give up power when one is not forced to do so. Or, as Henry Kissinger purportedly said, power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. The intense politicization of Taiwanese society is intimately tied in with the incremental process of political transition and the KMT's enduring strength in Taiwanese politics. Two decades after the start of political liberalization, it is still possible to hear comments from KMT politicians that hark back to another era. For example, one local party cadre explained to me at length why the KMT had a natural obligation to rule, while the DPP belonged to the opposition. In his view, the KMT was the rightful ruler, the DPP the usurper.²

While the outer markers of authoritarianism have disappeared from Taiwan, such comments suggest that many people still retain a lingering authoritarian mindset, especially the older generations that matured politically in an authoritarian environment. However, it has to be immediately stressed that this is not only something that afflicts KMT politicians. Similar trains of thought can also be discerned in people from other parties, including the DPP. Whether they know it or not, many people operate according to a logic that either aims to overthrow the old system or to protect its dominance, thinking that stems from an authoritarian context.

The KMT built an elaborate system of rule, with the party-state's reach into society being extensive. The apparent democratization of the political system disguises a considerable amount of inertia in underlying political and social structures, deriving from the old one-party system. Many of the structures underpinning this system, such as permeating mobilization networks and massive party assets, are still largely intact and have yet to be dismantled. This fact sits awkwardly with the constitutional reality of a semi-presidential system that allows for a situation where a reformist president and cabinet are locked

in permanent battle with an obstructionist legislature protecting vital material interests.

Consequently, any political issue that is likely to shift the power balance between the two political camps either directly or by affecting the resources at the disposal of either side develops into a political conflict and often gridlock. As Taiwan is neither clearly a presidential nor a parliamentary system, in a split situation such as the one after 2000 both sides frequently block or overturn each other's proposals and initiatives. However, institutional arrangements are not the root of Taiwan's intense politicization. In the absence of a clear and venomous political cleavage the same arrangements might not be problematic at all. A few years ago France managed a cohabitation situation quite well. It is the clear and intense partisan bifurcation deriving from the enduring one-party legacy that makes the institutional arrangements problematic.

The question of the KMT's future is inextricably tied to the fate of the Republic of China; rather as the Honecker regime's fate was tied to that of the GDR. Despite the long localization trend in the KMT since the 1970s, the party has never entirely localized. Indeed, it may even be said that the trend in recent years has been in the opposite direction, with mainlanders regaining control of the party leadership. The party's 'right to rule' to a large extent stems from the R.O.C., which is a major reason why it has been adamant about retaining the symbolic trappings of the R.O.C. state. For example, the KMT prefers to apply to United Nations bodies under the R.O.C. name, even though it obviously is an unworkable proposition given the international circumstances. Similarly, the party has resisted efforts to rewrite the constitution, as opposed to amending it. Senior party politicians and cadres have repeatedly stressed that the KMT will not abandon the Republic of China, the state founded by the party. The R.O.C. state is the political framework that provides the *raison d'être* for the KMT.

The stakes in the political game are further raised by the geopolitical situation of Taiwan. Existing in international limbo, without widely recognized statehood, the frictions caused by the asymmetric integration with the mainland, and in particular the pull of ever-deepening economic integration, gives a sense of urgency to those who wish to make a clearer political break with Mainland China before it is too late. However, the close economic integration between Taiwan and the mainland also makes formalizing the political break through a declaration of independence the work of a madman. Instead, the political conflict over Taiwan's status has gravitated toward a highly politicized perennial quarrel over symbolic nationness and, consequently, about the legacy of the R.O.C. state. Since symbolic nationness is also an issue that has much relevance for

ordinary people, mass political mobilization tends to revolve around the symbols of Taiwanese-ness and Chinese-ness.

Whatever the nature of the political system that the KMT built on Taiwan, one thing is certain: it did not establish a universal welfare state similar to those in northern Europe. The party-state provided discretionary benefits to parts of the population. The system was highly beneficial to some, while others received little if anything from it. People linked to the KMT party-state through party membership, government employment, local factions, party-affiliated associations, or elected and appointed positions, as well as their family members, made up a substantial proportion of the population. However, people not involved in the institutions of the party-state received little from it, therefore had little stake in it, and often developed a deep antagonism towards it. Belated efforts to build a semblance of a welfare system after political liberalization do not alter this fact.³

The state's legacy of granting privileges, favours and benefits was not discontinued by political liberalization. In Taiwan, building a universal welfare state implies the loss of privileges for many. As a direct consequence, the party-state-sanctioned patronage systems created powerful vested interests in various segments of the population, and powerful resentment at such privileges in other segments. We are reminded of Seymour Martin Lipset's words: 'The greater the importance of the central state as a source of prestige and advantage, the less likely it is that those in power – or the forces of opposition – will accept rules of the game that institutionalize party conflict and could result in the turnover of those in office.'⁴

The patronage state legacy is still strong in Taiwan. This can be contrasted with Mexico, a state that shares several of the traits of Taiwan, being both a torn country and one with a strong one-party and patronage state legacy that has been dismantled since the long-time ruling party lost power in 2000. A recent book has argued that one-party dominance in Mexico crumbled as the ruling party lost its ability to use the state for political patronage.⁵ In Taiwan, the KMT has been more successful in holding on to its patronage assets. With the old powers-that-be still clinging on to their vestiges of power by all possible means and the challenging political team using all means at its disposal to dismantle the old system, politicization is a predictable outcome. All is allowed in love, war ... and Taiwanese politics. The struggle proceeds with major elections serving a function similar to the rounds of a heavyweight boxing match. During the breaks, both sides try to stare down the other side in an interlude of psychological warfare. When a new round begins, both of the sluggers aim for the final knockout.

Dismantling the one-party system has occurred slowly and gradually, giving old political elites ample opportunity to block reforms. Those set to lose from the old system's disappearance have waged a long and bitter defensive struggle. Completely dismantling the old system would involve both a substantial redistribution of power and benefits and a redefinition of the state itself (Republic of China), from a China-focus to a Taiwan-focus, with major symbolic and practical consequences. The strong emotions aroused by this state redefinition and the real possibility of change through the ballot box increases popular interest in politics at the national level. Political parties play on these emotions.

One of the fundamental features of politically relevant social structures in Taiwan is the importance of vertical personal relationships. This factor is also consequential for politicization. Taiwan has adopted democratic political institutions without yet effecting a reorganization of the entire society, to refer back to Zygmunt Bauman's thoughts. When elections were introduced early on, political loyalties were built on pre-existing local social networks, rather than, for example, ideology, party identification or media image. This tradition became firmly established in the way elections are fought in Taiwan. Even today, the mobilization of particularistic ties, e.g. through local factions and vote buying, in election campaigning is crucial, while both Taiwanese politicians and voters are opportunistic about their party loyalties. The method of contesting elections was already partly established prior to political liberalization and retains many features from a one-party authoritarian context.

The patron-client legacy and strong particularistic ties turn these social networks into an effective means of political mobilization, and political elites frequently draw on such networks and partisan civic organizations. This facilitates an intense politicization of society and gives an impression of strong political participation. However, the passionate participation of part of the population coexists with increasing political disappointment and apathy among those not participating. Low party loyalty and significant incumbency benefits raise the stakes for politicians, as political support is fickle and potential losses substantial. If the political situation is relatively evenly divided, party instability ensues, as political opportunists within the two major political blocks readily switch to whichever side appears to offer better prospects.

The situation approximates the zero-sum logic that Tang Tsou has extensively discussed with regard to Chinese politics – the logic of winner-takes-all.⁶ There is no more graphic illustration of this logic than the fate that often awaits political leaders involved in power struggles after they lose power. Many of the losing political leaders in Mainland China until Mao's death paid for their loss with

their life. In current East Asian politics, from Thailand to the Philippines, from Malaysia to Taiwan, political leaders face the danger of criminal prosecution, often on various corruption charges, and a long time in jail after they step down or are forced from office. Just over a year after Chen Shui-bian stepped down from the presidency, he and his wife were handed life sentences for embezzlement and bribe taking, while their son and daughter-in-law also received prison sentences.⁷ Several other people close to the former president were also convicted. Losing is simply not an option for those active in the political game. This imperative gives Taiwanese politics much of its intensity and fervour.

BACK TO CHINA

The underlying logic of Taiwanese political party competition still carries the legacy of a struggle for complete victory. Given the widespread opportunism, which applies as much to politicians as it does to voters, the stakes for political parties in Taiwan are inordinately high and the peril of party implosion or division is always present. For the two established parties the main danger of this highly opportunistic context is a party split, while for less established parties the danger is implosion and complete collapse. Political uncertainty spurs intense political activity both by parties and by individual politicians to build and firm up support, especially given the high economic stakes involved. It also necessitates the use of various tactics for locking in political support, especially among those whose support is not so assured. The uncertainty related to political support heightens the politicization.

With the political stakes so high, it has so far proved impossible to set up a genuine coalition government between political parties. The style of politics in Taiwan has not yet 'normalized' in the sense of becoming dull, business-as-usual representative democracy. In the battle for decisive victory, the political parties' tools of choice have been electoral mobilization through reliance on well-oiled social networks – the nested pyramid structures that make up parties – and mass mobilization for political action. Initially, the KMT relied mainly on the first and the DPP on the latter, but now both parties make use of both tools.⁸

The style of Taiwanese politics is confrontational rather than consensus seeking. This feature is intriguing, given that so many observers have talked of a Chinese or East Asian cultural preference for seeking consensus rather than confrontation. If there is such a cultural preference, it quickly succumbed to the thrills of political confrontation once such an opportunity was offered by the structural constellations of Taiwan's transition process. While culture clearly

does not prevent democratization, it may still complicate it. However, the reasons for Taiwan's intense politicization are structural, not cultural, in nature. The very political processes that are supposed to underpin democratic politics – electoral campaigning, political rallies, vote mobilization, parliamentary debate and media coverage of politics – may actually undermine Taiwan's democracy by the way they are pursued. The underlying reason for this counterintuitive observation is that these processes mix badly with the structures of a society that has yet to rid itself of its one-party-system past.

Political mass actions served a purpose in the early struggle against the old regime, and raised direct political participation to a high level. They later became a key obstacle to normalizing Taiwanese representative democracy.⁹ The very logic of *zaoshi* is a struggle for victory in zero-sum circumstances, which is not conducive to normalizing policy-making or responsible opposition politics. According to Stepan and Linz, democratic consolidation requires not only a shared normative commitment, but also a behavioural commitment by all sectors of society to the democratic system.¹⁰ If both the opposition and the government expend far more effort in mobilizing mass rallies and referenda against each other rather than working for political compromise, the underlying political cleavage will be recurrently activated and intense politicization will remain a semi-permanent state of affairs.

Zaoshi is the quintessence of the intense politicization of Taiwanese society. It is a symptom of the ailment of Taiwan's body politic. Ironically, the DPP, while attacking the vestiges of Chineseness in Taiwan, simultaneously perpetuated a long legacy of Chinese political culture through its frequent use of the *zaoshi* tool. However, massive rallies are only the most visible sign of the boundaries of politics expanding beyond formal political institutions. On a micro-level, Taiwan's structural politicization took politics far beyond the role envisaged by Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* for the citizen in a representative democracy, who, ideally, should be participating in the running of the state in theory but not in practice. At the height of Taiwan's politicization, one could genuinely claim that everything was politics, with large parts of the population regularly taking part in political mass actions and the political battle also invading workplaces and even family affairs. Breaking free from the detrimental mould of political competition is necessary if this overly politicized society is to achieve a condition where politics contents itself with being an activity confined mainly to formal political institutions. This would make democratic politics more dull, but also more durable.

Most of the factors that I have described as promoting Taiwanese politicization are also present in the People's Republic in one form or another, as it shares much in terms of the structures of the one-party system, social structures and political culture with Taiwan. Of course, we should not fall into over-simplifying naivety and assume that there is no substantial difference between politics in Taiwan and Mainland China. Yet, it is equally naive to expect that Taiwan can just forget about the roots of its one-party political system; roots that stem from the turbulent establishment of a modern political system on the mainland. This affects not only the nature of the constitutional system, but also more fundamentally the nature of political parties and political competition.

Put the other way, Taiwan's experience with democratization also has something to teach us about the prospects for Mainland China, should it eventually decide to take the same road. The CCP has built a formidable power position on the mainland using much the same tools as the KMT in Taiwan. The party will absolutely not want to relinquish control of the political system. However, it may one day come to the conclusion that some measure of political liberalization is unavoidable due to societal pressures, but that such liberalization has to occur in a very incremental and party-controlled manner. If that scenario ever came to pass, several of the circumstances would be in place for structural politicization to develop.

NOTES

- 1 Shelley Rigger has also used the term 'unfinished' to refer to Taiwan's political transition. Rigger, 'The unfinished business of Taiwan's democratization.'
- 2 Author's interview in Tainan, June 2002.
- 3 The development of social welfare legislation in Taiwan has been chronicled in a paper written by Chan and Lin, 'Taiwan.'
- 4 Lipset, 'The social requisites of democracy revisited,' 4.
- 5 Greene, Kenneth F. (2007) *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 6 Tang, 'Chinese politics at the top.'
- 7 Huang, Shelley, 'Chen Shui-bian gets life,' *Taipei Times* 12 September 2009, p. 1.
- 8 The very early *dangwai* candidates made extensive use of social networks, based on kinship, friendship and community faction, in order to build political support. Chao and Myers, 'How elections promoted democracy in Taiwan under martial law,' 402.

- 9 Few people in society actually took part in the social protests in the mid-late 1980s. Chu, 'Crafting democracy in Taiwan,' 121.
- 10 Linz and Stepan, 'Toward consolidated democracies,' 14–33.