

Taiwan's Best-Case Democratization

by Shelley Rigger

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Democratization is never easy. The United States, buffered by two oceans and blessed with an abundance of land, resources, and eager citizens, still required a century of trial and error—including a civil war—to consolidate its democracy. States that have been born or converted to democracy since World War II have made faster progress, but many have regressed, as well. A look at the democracy ratings published each year since 1972 by the Washington-based Freedom House think tank reveals a number of countries whose freedom ratings have risen and fallen, in some cases repeatedly. Among these uneven “third-wave” democratizations, Taiwan’s stands out as relatively smooth and successful. Taiwan’s transformation from single-party authoritarianism to multiparty democracy came about with very little violence or bloodshed. Nor did it require wrenching economic or social upheavals. In fact, one might describe Taiwan’s experience as a “best-case” democratization. Paradoxically, Taiwan’s best-case democratization reinforces the claim that lasting democratization is very difficult. For after more than a decade of democratic politics, Taiwan is still struggling to implement effective governance.

The Best-Case Democratization

Students of democratization have identified a number of factors that contribute to successful political transformation. We know, for example, that “where the *via revolucionaria* is taken, or when violence becomes widespread and recurrent, the prospects for political democracy are drastically reduced.”¹ Democracy rarely thrives if it lacks indigenous roots;

¹Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 11.

new democracies do best in countries with prior democratic experience, even if previous attempts failed.² A country that is moving briskly toward socioeconomic development, with a strong middle class, has a better chance of democratizing than an impoverished nation whose people are sharply divided into haves and have-nots.³ And countries with a strong sense of national identity perform better than those without.⁴ Taiwan's democratization benefited from a number of advantages, especially the existence of an ingrained democratic ideology, social mobilization, preexisting patterns of democratic activity, international pressure, and pragmatic leadership.

Even under the single-party authoritarianism of Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT), the ideological justification for the Republic of China was its aspiration to be—or become—democratic. From its inception on the Chinese mainland almost a century ago, the KMT was based on Sun Yat-sen's notion of the Three Principles of the People: nationalism, economic justice, and democracy. Thus, the KMT-led government that took control of Taiwan when the Japanese colonial government withdrew in 1945 based its legitimacy on its democratic aspirations. It expended enormous effort on indoctrinating the Taiwanese people in Sun Yat-sen's thought, which includes the notion of political tutelage, a requirement that Sun said China eventually would outgrow. The KMT also promoted this idea abroad and made much of its identity as "Free China." After the People's Republic of China solidified its control over mainland China, the ROC's international legitimacy rested almost entirely on its claim to be a democracy.

For several decades, however, the KMT allowed the principle of nationalism primacy over democracy, claiming that restoring ROC rule over mainland China was such an important goal that it justified delaying the implementation of democracy. Many Taiwanese viewed this logic as a transparent rationalization of authoritarianism, and one of its effects was to erode the KMT's legitimacy. But as the PRC gained military strength and international recognition, the KMT's rationale for limiting popular participation and influence—the imperative of reestablishing Nationalist control on the mainland—seemed increasingly feeble and unrealistic. This provoked increasingly noisy challenges from activists demanding a more democratic state, one in which Taiwanese whose residence predated the KMT's arrival (this group, normally referred to as "Taiwanese," constituted about 85 percent of the population) would gain political influence in proportion to their numbers.

Taiwan's social mobilization was driven by the rapid economic development that gripped the island from the mid-1950s through the 1980s.

²Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 42.

³Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Mar./June 1992, pp. 450–99, at p. 486.

⁴Danwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics*, April 1970, pp. 337–63, at p. 350.

In those years, Taiwan's economy grew at an average annual rate of almost 9 percent. As a result, a rising tide of citizen expectations and demands overtook the authoritarian state. The island's growing middle class had the skills, confidence and international experience to participate actively in politics. In the early years of ROC control on Taiwan, most of the high-status positions available were in state agencies and public universities, but economic development created opportunities for professionals in fields such as law, medicine, and business administration whose income and status were outside the state's reach.

As the KMT loosened its grip on Taiwan's social and political life, the political opposition pressed the ruling party to accelerate that process. The dissident movement, which was suppressed in the 1960s, seized every opportunity to expand its activities in the 1970s and '80s, constantly forcing the KMT to choose between its authoritarian impulses and the need to maintain popular and international support. These pressures, which were intensified by Taiwan's flagging standing in the world community, helped to split the ruling party into hardline and reformist factions. By the 1980s, the opposition was ready to form a political party capable of mounting a national-level challenge to the KMT's hegemony, and in 1986, the first opposition party—the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—was born. Less than a year later, President Chiang Ching-kuo abolished martial law, which had provided the institutional justification for denying Taiwan residents' civil liberties since the 1940s.

Another important factor in Taiwan's best-case democratization was the existence of long-standing democratic institutions and practices. The ROC constitution is a democratic document, establishing a system of separated powers based on popular sovereignty. The suspension of popular control was justified on the grounds of national emergency. Nor were these democratic provisions mere window dressing. The ruling party willingly implemented those constitutional provisions that did not endanger its hegemonic position. That meant that while the KMT denied Taiwan's long-time residents the opportunity to elect their national leaders, it sponsored elections for local leaders from the 1940s on. Beginning in the late 1960s, and accelerating through the '70s and '80s, the KMT gradually provided Taiwanese with opportunities to elect national politicians as well, and at the same time it broadened access to the party itself.⁵

⁵In 1947, legislative elections were held throughout the ROC. When the Nationalists' military defeat forced them to move the ROC government to Taiwan, these legislators were retained in office, pending a time when elections could once again be conducted in the mainland. As a result, Taiwanese representatives constituted a tiny fraction of the ROC legislature. By 1968, natural attrition had so diminished the number of these "senior legislators" that the government began instituting "supplementary elections" to fill a small number of seats every three years. It was only in 1992 that the senior legislators were retired, and replaced *in toto* by representatives chosen by Taiwan's electorate.

Until the 1990s, these elections were “plebiscitary.”⁶ That is, because the results of these local and supplementary national elections could not overturn the KMT government, voters were free to express their desire for political and institutional change without worrying about the vote’s consequences for social and economic stability. In many cases, voters treated elections as an opportunity to show their support for democratization by choosing opposition candidates. Plebiscitary elections offered an institutionalized venue for the periodic expression of preferences by the society—preferences that often supported the opposition’s demands. They also gave dissident politicians a platform for mobilizing popular support.

Local elections also helped prepare Taiwanese for democracy by providing regular opportunities for voters to master the art of voting and candidates the art of electioneering. As the scope of direct election expanded to include more, and more powerful, offices, their experience with lower-level elections equipped Taiwan’s politicians to move smoothly into those higher-stakes contests. This education was not complete, however. As we shall see, competing for office did not teach politicians—especially those in the opposition party—how to use those offices to govern effectively. Nor did it prepare ruling party politicians to be loyal and constructive in opposition.

Taiwan’s democratization benefited from international as well as domestic forces. Over the years from the 1950s through the ’70s, the world community came to recognize the PRC as a permanent—and legitimate—fixture on the world scene. This stripped the ROC of its privileged position as the preferred representative of the Chinese state. To maintain international support, the KMT turned more and more to its image as Free China. But that case was not convincing so long as the ROC’s democracy was deferred by a single-party, authoritarian regime that imposed martial law and suppressed the opposition. Thus, the PRC’s rising international stature intensified the pressure on the KMT to bring political reality into synch with its democratic rhetoric. At the same time, the ROC’s flagging international position undermined the KMT’s domestic claims, first by making mainland recovery seem more remote than ever and also by sharpening the contradiction between the ROC’s international self-representation as Free China and its authoritarian reality.

In response to all these pressures, Taiwan’s leaders—in particular Chiang Ching-kuo, president from 1978 until his death in 1988—chose the path of gradual, controlled concession over a strategy of stonewalling and suppression. President Chiang’s successor, President Lee Teng-hui, was even more aggressive in allying with the democratic movement against hardliners in his own party. The result was a series of agreements that defined an expanding realm of democratic accountability and participation. These pacts

⁶ Bolivar Lamounier, in Alfred Stepan, ed., *Democratizing Brazil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 62.

set the parameters for Taiwan's new democracy. However, they also reflected the particular strategic interests and calculations of the players. The result was a democratization that was evolutionary, peaceful, and protracted, all of which are associated with successful democratic transitions. However, Taiwan's was also a top-down democratization, in which the ruling party controlled both the pace and the content of the reforms. And this element, it seems, has produced some more problematic outcomes. As Gretchen Casper of the University of Michigan has observed, "the compromises reached during the transition hindered the new democracy's chances of consolidating, because the authoritarian incumbents were able to retain a significant level of influence."⁷

“Best-case” Democratization; “Best-case” Democracy?

It is easy to criticize the performance of Taiwan's democracy. However, it is important, also, to acknowledge the huge strides it has made since the 1970s. Yale political scientist Robert Dahl argued in *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (1971) that democracy includes two dimensions, political contestation and civil rights, and many theorists since Dahl have observed that true representative government cannot thrive without strong performance on both of these scales. By this measure, Taiwan's democratization has been a great success. Political contestation has expanded from semi-open, frequently fraudulent battles over local offices in which only one political party was allowed to participate, to include direct, multi-party elections for the highest offices in the land. Taiwan's government is accountable to its citizens through elections and a robust interest-group sector. Meanwhile, Taiwanese enjoy well-protected civil liberties and political freedoms. They read what they like, say what they like, and form organizations without government interference. Compared to the 1950s and '60s—a period known today as the “White Terror”—democracy is performing very well indeed.

It is the ability to provide political freedom while remaining accountable to the public that makes a democratic government democratic. But to be a government, it needs to govern—to respond with effective public policy to the popular preferences expressed through a free media and electoral process. It is on this front that Taiwan's democracy has encountered its greatest challenges. In particular, Taiwan's new democracy suffers from four serious failings: divided government leading to a legislative-executive stalemate; a failure of inter-party negotiation and compromise; inaction on critical issues; and politicization and partisanship so extreme that the government is unable to move even in a crisis.

Taiwan's governance problems are rooted in both institutional weaknesses and dysfunctional patterns of behavior, especially among

⁷ Gretchen Casper, “The Benefits of Difficult Transitions,” *Democratization*, Autumn 2000, pp. 46–62, at p. 54.

politicians. The latter owe in large part to the persistent habits and norms of the pre-democratic period. Many of Taiwan's institutional problems, ironically enough, grew out of the gradual, controlled democratization process that allowed the transformation to occur peacefully, but at the same time distorted the reforms in ways that produced lasting weaknesses.

The most debilitating of Taiwan's institutional flaws is the amended constitution's failure to establish whether the ROC is a presidential, parliamentary, semi-presidential, or semi-parliamentary state. Ambiguity on this fundamental question causes paralysis and gridlock, encouraging both the president and the legislature to cling tenaciously to their own prerogatives in the hope that the other will yield. So long as the two branches were controlled by a single political party, this contradiction was muted. But in May 2000, the presidential office came under DPP control while the KMT and its allies retained a legislative majority. The result was a divided government that brought the problem into sharp relief.

The original ROC constitution establishes a parliamentary or semi-parliamentary state. It provided for direct election of a legislature charged with all aspects of domestic policy-making. An indirectly-elected president was to appoint a premier and cabinet responsible to the legislature. The constitution gave the president control over foreign and defense policy, but presidential initiatives require the countersignature of the premier. During the democratic transition, the president's role was enhanced in subtle ways, but the legislature's powers were not adjusted. For example, direct presidential election made the presidency more prestigious and gave it the aura of a mandate. Combined with the *de facto* power of presidents since Chiang Kai-shek, the expectations created by direct election made it very hard to persuade Taiwanese that theirs was not a presidential system. However, the president cannot put through legislation, nor does he have effective veto power over the Legislative Yuan. These haphazard changes destabilized the balance of power between the two branches.

Legal scholars predicted that the constitutional revisions undertaken in the 1980s and '90s would create problems if the country were to experience divided government, but their arguments fell on deaf ears. The considerations and motivations that drove the constitutional reforms had little to do with constitutional niceties; on the contrary, Taiwan's democratization was deeply intertwined with the competition for power within the KMT.

When Chiang died in 1988, his vice president, Lee Teng-hui, assumed the ROC's highest office. Many observers expected that Lee, a Taiwanese whose rise in the KMT was due to Chiang's direct patronage, lacked the depth of support in the party to hold onto the presidency. But Lee defied expectations by using the reform process to marginalize his enemies, strengthen his friends, and win the opposition's good will. The constitutional reforms undertaken on his watch are neither fully coherent nor particularly well-designed, but they accomplished his goal of increasing his control over

the political system. For example, DPP leaders in the 1980s believed (correctly, as it turned out) that their best chance for coming to power was to win a presidential election. Thus they lent their support to Lee's efforts to strengthen the presidency, including by making it directly elected. Lee, for his part, used the strengthened presidency to undermine his political opponent, Premier Hau Pei-tsun. In short, Taiwan's constitutional revisions have an ad hoc feeling; they are the product of strategically-motivated tinkering, not a thorough-going overhaul.

Another reason for democratic Taiwan's inefficient governance is its party system. Here again, the gradual nature of the reform process produced political outcomes that do not reflect the needs and conditions of today's Taiwan. Taiwan's political parties got their start in the authoritarian period, the KMT as a hegemonic ruling party, the DPP as an opposition party dedicated to the twin causes of democratization and ethnic justice. Fundamentally, the DPP has succeeded: the political system has no room for a hegemonic party, and new issues such as managing the economy and cross-strait relations have replaced the grand causes on which the DPP cut its political teeth. The system has changed and the issues have changed, but the parties have not. None of the major parties possess a coherent ideological or programmatic package. These are parties suited to an authoritarian state under fire, not a democratic nation managing day-to-day problems of routine political and economic maintenance.

Yet another of Taiwan's institutional problems is the poor quality of its legislature. Here again, the legacy of authoritarianism is largely to blame. In the absence of a clear rupture between the authoritarian system and its democratic successor, aspects of the legislature that were tolerable before the transition have survived to pose serious problems for the democratized state. Prior to democratization, the Legislative Yuan was a weak body, denied the opportunity to deliberate meaningfully or reject legislation. If it was not a rubber stamp, it was close to one. As a result, it was not provided with the committee structures or staff resources that would allow it to function effectively. Also, many politicians pursued seats in the legislature out of vanity or self-interest; the quality of Taiwan's legislators—who enjoy a strong incumbency advantage—is thus quite poor. It is taking time for this institution, which was never expected to take responsibility for serious policy decisions, to grow into its new role of supervising the executive branch and legislating for the nation.

In addition to these institutional problems, the quality of governance in Taiwan suffers from norms and habits of behavior that do not lend themselves to efficiency or high-mindedness. These, too, are exacerbated by the absence of a clear rupture between the authoritarian period and the democratic era. Politicians and citizens have never faced the necessity of altering their expectations and behavior to suit a radically new political framework. First, decades of single-party authoritarianism and corruption

have made Taiwanese cynical about politicians' motives and the usefulness of political engagement. The rush of opportunists to the DPP after its successful presidential bid only reinforces the sense that all politicians are ill-motivated and corrupt. And indeed, many Taiwanese politicians *are* corrupt, as numerous ROC government reports and investigations reveal. In order to ensure that it would win local elections during the authoritarian period, the KMT tolerated, and even encouraged, some highly unsavory politicians to represent the party, either because they had local political support or because they had money to spend on their campaigns. Again, the gradual and continuous nature of the transition process allowed dysfunctional qualities to persist into the democratic period.

While Taiwanese are cynical about politicians, their own expectations tend to reinforce the self-seeking qualities they claim to abhor. Taiwanese are accustomed to a paternalistic style of government. Years of authoritarianism habituated islanders to expect the state to take care of them, without much reciprocal effort from citizens. Constituent service is the first principle of Taiwanese politics. When the democratic state proves unable to meet citizens' particularistic demands, it is resented. Thus, when the SARS crisis wracked Taiwan in spring 2003, citizens expected the state to fix the problem but often refused to comply with quarantines and other containment measures.

Finally, Taiwan's pre-democratic history did little to help politicians develop the skills of compromise and graceful defeat that successful democratic governance requires. Few of the island's politicians have adjusted to the fact that in a democratic politics, you win some and you lose some. They view winning as a license to crush opponents utterly and losing as tantamount to death. Compromise that allows one's opponent to salvage something from the fight is hard come by.

Conclusion

The democratization of the ROC on Taiwan is a splendid accomplishment. In many ways, it truly is a best-case example. However, it is far from perfect; the ease with which Taiwan made the transition to democracy belies the difficulty it faces in functioning democratically. There are two cautionary aspects to this story. First, for those who care about Taiwan, the challenges its democracy faces have a special urgency. Unlike most countries, Taiwan sits perilously close to an antagonistic giant whose political, economic, and military might are great and growing. With the PRC so close at hand, Taiwan does not have the leisure to learn through its mistakes. Second, for those who care about democratization, Taiwan shows very clearly just how difficult this exercise really is. Even the best-case democratization faces profound and lasting challenges.

