

Taiwan's 2012 elections: Campaign, Predictions and Consequences

By Dafydd Fell

Back in March this year I wrote a piece for Brookings North East Asia Commentary looking ahead to next January's national level elections in Taiwan. Now seven-eight months later and just over two months from voting day I thought this would be a good chance to revisit this important topic.

It is all too common in the West to hear the complaint that elections do not matter. Fortunately we cannot say this about Taiwan. Since 2008 Ma Ying-jeou has brought about a radical transformation in cross-strait relations and left an important mark on Taiwan's modern history. It is very unlikely so much would have happened if Hsieh Chang-ting had won the presidency.

So what is special about this campaign?

Firstly, it is the first time that presidential and legislative elections have been held simultaneously, thus the campaign feels very different from previous contests.

Based on my observation of the national press it feels like the Legislative Yuan campaign has completely disappeared, as it has been so overshadowed by presidential campaign. Previous legislative elections all received far more media attention. This is unfortunate as one of the important lessons of the DPP era was that parliamentary elections are as important as the presidential ones. A critical reason for why Chen Shui-bian achieved so little when president was that his party never controlled the Legislative Yuan.

The importance of the Legislative Yuan means it needs real democratic scrutiny and it is not getting this in the current campaign. This term Ma had a huge legislative majority but has delivered very little in terms of domestic reforms. This has been a wasted opportunity.

Over the years the DPP has tended to put too much stress on presidential elections and neglected legislative campaigning, and this year appears to have been no exception to this pattern. This has been a serious mistake in judgement as the Legislative Yuan represents the most effective institution for really checking the KMT.

Secondly, this has been the least passionate presidential election so far in Taiwan's history. In all four previous contests there was genuine voter passion for at least one of the tickets and on some occasions for two camps. I do not feel this kind of voter enthusiasm this time. Both have some catchy TV ads and slogans but neither camp has yet come up with anything like an inspiring vision for Taiwan's future.

Thirdly, one thing that I am surprised about is how little has changed in terms of the poll standings of the two camps since my March article. My initial understanding was that Ma had a narrow but not unsurpassable lead over either of his potential DPP rivals and that

remains the case against Tsai Ing-wen today. In previous elections, like 2000 and 2004 we saw huge support swings but so far nothing like that has happened this time. As always we need to be highly cautious in how we read Taiwanese election polls, considering political bias of the polling organizations and underestimating certain partisan support groups. However, it would still only take a minor swing for Tsai to win.

As is often the case China policy has been central to the campaign. It does seem this issue has been more prominent on the agenda than in 2008, where domestic issues were more influential. Tsai has proposed a Taiwan consensus, in other words arguing that Taiwan should try to find domestic agreement on China/external policies before embarking on further agreements with China. I have made a similar appeal in a previous Taipei Times article. She appears more pragmatic than Chen on China. But what Tsai has still not really explained is how can the DPP engage with China without the 92 consensus? How can she avoid the cross-Strait stalemate of 1995-2008?

Ma's team have criticised Tsai on vagueness on these same questions, and it will continue to reinforce those attack as the election draws closer. There is a widespread perception that is to the KMT's advantage to get the campaign agenda focused on cross-Strait issues. This is not necessarily the case. Ma also has unanswered questions on China. He has achieved what he set out to on China in his first term. But what are his plans for the next four years? He has also been rather vague on this. The peace accord idea is an interesting proposal but this is a long-term objective and not feasible in his second term. In fact the whole thing may end up backfiring, particularly with his pledge to put any agreement to referendum.

What I would like to see is more discussion on how the two parties will tackle the pressing domestic issues. For instance, the growing gap between rich and poor, how to integrate new migrants, promote gender equality, how to reform problematic features of Taiwan's political and judicial systems, just to name a few. Hopefully we will see this brought out in the debates and final weeks of the campaign. But I am not too confident as identity and external relations often dominate the final hot period of the campaign.

One of the surprises this year is the Soong Chu-yu's candidacy, the first potential third candidate since 2000. But I still doubt he will have a major impact on either campaign. Many assume he will split the pro KMT vote and favour Tsai's chances. My reading of the polls is though he has more sympathy from Blue voters, he also is attracting support from the independents and undecided voters that Tsai needs to have a chance of winning. My instinct is that most of those Pan Blue voters that sympathize with him will eventually vote Ma, as Soong has no chance. It is completely different from 2000 when no one or few really knew who was ahead between Lien Chan and Soong in the last weeks.

So what are the most likely outcomes?

We can rule out a repeat of the landslide KMT victories seen in 2008, just as we can the DPP winning both elections. The KMT's incumbency advantage and the bias in the electoral system make a DPP legislative majority unlikely this time. The two most possible outcomes are first that Ma narrowly wins re-election and the KMT gets a narrow legislative majority. The second is that Tsai wins narrowly and the KMT gets a narrow Legislative Yuan majority. My view is still that the first is more likely but that the second is still a genuine possibility at this stage.

What would be the implications of such results?

Although China would prefer the former, neither is particularly promising for its objectives. Whoever wins the presidency will face much stronger domestic constraints on developing external relations. This could lead to increasing impatience from China.

But both outcomes could be beneficial good for Taiwan's democracy. The last four years Taiwan has shared some features last seen in late 1980s and early 1990s, in that there were no real institutional checks and balances on the ruling party, as the KMT's majority was just so overwhelming. This should make Ma more willing to seek domestic consensus and move much slower on relations with China, and hopefully refocus on domestic issues. But another more dangerous scenario is that we get a return to the antagonistic and polarized politics of the second Chen term.

If Tsai wins she needs to be able to find a way to work with the KMT majority, something that Chen failed at miserably. My own suggestion would be to allow the KMT to form a coalition cabinet that also included DPP members and independents. Such an operation would again require real cross-party negotiation and compromise. The DPP era showed that appointing a premier and cabinet without parliamentary backing would be a recipe for disaster.