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Taiwan:

Presidential elections in the shadow of the Empire

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On January 14, 2012, the Taiwanese people voted for a new national assembly and president. Ma Ying-jeou, the outgoing president and chair of the Kuomintang (KMT) party, was re-elected with 51.60% of the votes, against 45.63% for the candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The KMT also gained an absolute majority in the National Assembly (60 seats out of 113). This was the fifth direct election since the democratic transition in 1994. The rate of participation in the election was the lowest since 1994, at around 75%. If the result held few surprises, the course of the electoral campaign showed to what point the political development of the country is under the influence of the economic interests of foreign powers, notably China and the United States.

Based on a two party system, Taiwanese democracy has for a long time been dominated by the debate on relations between Taiwan and China. The KMT has always insisted on the territorial unity of Taiwan and China stressing the principle of “one China, two models”. It seeks a long term reunification. During the campaign, the DPP took an ambiguous position on the question of independence in relation to mainland China and on the questions of social policy which concern its centre-left electorate [1]. Ma’s previous term between 2008 and 2012 was marked by closer links with China, notably with the implementation of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), the development of tourism from the mainland to Taiwan and the arrival of Chinese students on the island. Even if industrial relocations to China had begun well before 2008 [2], the official rapprochement between mainland China and Taiwan was reflected at the national level by an absence of political responses to growing poverty and an inability to construct a specific economic policy favouring internal consumption. Investment in Taiwan has stagnated and labour market insecurity has increased because of the predominance of the tertiary sector.

Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP presidential candidate and a specialist in commercial law, is the symbol of a less radical current on the de jure independence of Taiwan. Her image marked a break with the popular tradition of the DPP and seemed rather aimed at winning over the voters of the centre. She appeared less convincing to the popular classes, the traditional voters of the DPP. Tsai’s main challenge during the campaign was to provide an economic programme which was both protectionist (to reduce economic dependence on China) and realistic (given that China is already the main “economic partner” of Taiwan), so as to keep the votes of traditional electors and win those of centrists.

One of the striking points of the presidential campaign was the virtual absence of debate concerning internal policy. The KMT campaign essentially rested on only two subjects: political stability between Taiwan and China so as to guarantee economic growth, and accusations of corruption against Tsai during the previous presidential term of Chen Shui-Bian. Tsai sought to appear as the candidate of the middle and popular classes, without success [3]

While Beijing remained exceptionally silent during the campaign, at the last minute the big entrepreneurs gave their support to the KMT so as to defend their economic interests. Thus Guo Tai-ming, CEO of Foxconn, where a wave of young workers have committed suicide since 2010, stated publicly his preference for political “stability” and encouraged his Taiwanese expatriate employees in China to return to Taiwan to vote. Also Wang Xue-hong, CEO of HTC and the richest entrepreneur in Taiwan, called for “peaceful relations between Taiwan and China” on the eve of the vote. Their position reveals to what point the interests of Taiwanese capitalists converge with those of the governments on both sides of the Formosa Strait. That is why Beijing no longer needs to intervene through military threats, as it tried to do in 2000 – it was sufficient to let it be understood that voting for the DPP would cause damage to the Taiwanese economy.

As for the United States, the Obama government also played its cards in the Taiwan elections. A week before the

day of the vote, a delegation from Washington arrived in Taiwan and announced that “if Ma is re-elected Washington and Beijing will be reassured”. The delegation then called for respect for the “1992 Consensus” which defines Taiwan and China as a single country [4]. These words show the growing reluctance of the US to intervene in relations between Taiwan and China and to confront the Middle Kingdom.

Certainly international factors alone do not explain the results. The results for the parliamentary elections and the formation of a front for independence express a disagreement with Ma’s politics, reflected in the loss of 800,000 votes in comparison with the elections of 2008 [5]. In addition the low rate of participation seems to bear witness to a popular disillusionment with what remains a controlled democracy. Between a conservative party and a party hesitating between a radical nationalism and a more “centrist” approach, the frustrations of the people are far from being heard.

A week after Ma’s re-election, the KMT government announced the resumption of negotiations on the free trade agreement between Taiwan and the USA (TIFA). This agreement has stalled particularly on the question of the importing into Taiwan of US hormone treated beef. It seems difficult not to see links between US economic interests and the KMT’s continued hold on power. With this logic, public health is sacrificed in the name of political conquest and the wellbeing of citizens is subordinated to economic interests. If this scenario is not currently specific to Taiwan – a parallel could be drawn with the struggle in Greece – it is not possible to fill this democratic deficit without a broad mobilisation, to place human beings back at the centre of political discussion, and favour the needs of the people rather than those of transnational capital.

[1] The DPP emerged from the struggles for democracy and de jure independence in Taiwan from the 1970s onwards. It brings together different currents with different views on questions like independence, the social movements and social democracy

[2] Since the beginning of mainland China’s economic reforms in the 1990s it has sought to attract investment from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Fourteen “special economic zones” have been set up for this purpose in southern coastal towns of mainland China, leading to increasing de-industrialisation in Taiwan from 1996 onwards. Even when the political climate was unfavourable to this trend, for example when the DPP was in power between 2000 and 2008, many entrepreneurs chose to base themselves in Hong Kong or the countries of south east Asia to invest in China

[3] Washington Post Nov 11, 2011, Taiwan opposition builds campaign with shiny, tiny piggy banks in bid to unseat President Ma

[4] This refers to the 1992 agreement between Chinese and Taiwanese governments that Taiwan and China “form one single China”. During the election Ma proposed a referendum on peace between Taiwan and China on the basis of the “1992 Consensus” specifying that Taiwan would declare “neither independence, nor reunification, nor war” to guarantee economic stability. This forced the DPP to also express its view on the “1992 Consensus”

[5] The KMT lost 20 seats in the national assembly while the pro-independence party, the “Union for Taiwanese solidarity” gained three seats