

## The Chinese shadow on Taiwan's elections

Written by Gerrit van der Wees  
Monday, 30 January 2012 08:43

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The dust is settling over the Jan. 14 elections and many a commentator has weighed in with the conclusion that this was a vote for “stability,” in particular across the Taiwan Strait.

I would disagree, for a number of reasons, which will be elaborated on below. However, first, I would like to mention that I speak from the perspective of a long-time Taiwan observer, who started to follow and analyze the country's political developments in the late 1970s, and who experienced Taiwan's momentous transition to democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

During the recent election campaign, I was “on the ground” with a delegation from the International Committee for Fair Elections in Taiwan (ICFET), headed by former Alaska governor and senator Frank Murkowski. We visited Greater Kaohsiung, Greater Tainan, Greater Taichung and Taipei and met with representatives from all three major political parties participating in the elections, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the People First Party (PFP).

The ICFET observer group will come out with its report in the near future, but I can already highlight two major conclusions:

One was that the elections were only partly fair because of the authoritarian legacy and widespread vote-buying, combined with extensive use of administrative power and party assets. In the 2008 presidential campaign, then-presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) promised to divest the party of these assets, but this never happened.

The second element of unfairness in the recent election was China's influence and economic leverage. The Washington Post recently published an article about a Taiwanese businessman who had invested in China, influencing the elections through his wealth and control of news media. However, this was only one element in the pervasive influence China exerted in these elections: The “agricultural purchasing missions” to southern areas and the throttling back of tourist groups prior to the polls were other means of “subtle” influence.

The bottom line is that the playing field was not level. In particular, the uneven access to resources is detrimental to the democracy we all want to see flourish in Taiwan

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One can not thus say that it was a vote for “stability,” but more a vote out of a fear of instability. And this fear of instability was induced by both the Chinese side, through a number of statements that a choice for the DPP would lead to a break in economic relations, and the KMT itself, which played up these concerns.

What is the net result of a win for Ma, the KMT and Taiwan? In the short term, there may be a fictitious peace and quiet, but the Chinese leaders will interpret the situation as going their way and will pressure Ma to start “political talks.” This will put increasing pressure on the country's democracy and increasingly diminish the freedoms and liberty Taiwanese achieved in their transition to democracy.

The ultimate question is whether Taiwanese will be able to freely determine their future as a democratic nation. Its authoritarian heritage and China's shadow over the recent elections have already significantly reduced this freedom.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2012/01/30](#)