

Election lessons for government and the DPP

Written by Chang Kuo-tsai 張國才

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The Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) resounding defeat in Saturday's nine-in-one elections should jar it into heeding the following warning signs:

First, the BBC's Chinese-language Web site hit the nail on the head when it said that Taiwanese elections are turning into variety shows.

With a malicious neighbor like China, how can Taiwan let its elections sink to the level of entertainment?

It could be a game of death for Taiwan's democracy.

Why did Hou You-yi (侯友宜), the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) candidate for New Taipei City mayor, trounce his DPP rival, Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌), despite refusing to participate in debates?

How did Kaohsiung mayor-elect Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) of the KMT easily beat DPP candidate Chen Chi-mai (陳其邁), despite failing to answer several questions in their debate?

It really makes a mockery of democratic elections.

Second, there has been a big shift in public opinion.

The DPP in 2016 won landslide victories in the Jan. 16 presidential and legislative elections.

Less than three years later — even though the DPP's candidates were at least as good as their rivals — the number of DPP mayors in the six special municipalities went from four to two,

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while the DPP kept just four of the nine other cities and counties it previously governed.

The defeat was largely the result of the DPP's central leadership drifting away from the grassroots. Voters have taught President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration a lesson about its "cloud governance."

Saturday's results were a backlash against the DPP for such a departure from public opinion.

Third, the government's reforms are stalling. If the public had wanted to keep the "status quo," voters in 2016 would not have replaced the KMT with the DPP.

Reforms need orienting, prioritizing. The most applauded part of Tsai's inaugural speech was the part about judicial reforms, but those reforms are still treading water.

Why did her government have to push through its plan for employees to have "one fixed day off, one flexible rest day" workweek, despite the barrage of complaints from employers and workers?

As for gender issues, of course people's sexual orientation should be respected, but the referendum against same-sex marriage show that Tsai has boxed herself in by treating LGBTIQ issues as a national policy of top priority.

The DPP's election defeats make Tsai a lame-duck president. This is surely not what voters had in mind in 2016, when they handed the DPP control of the legislative and executive branches of government.

Fourth, China successfully interfered in the elections. When China's "Internet army" tried to interfere in the US midterm elections, US President Donald Trump's team saw what it was up to and took precautions early on, leaving China empty-handed.

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By contrast, China has done much better using the same tactics on Taiwan. In the past, China tried using verbal and military threats and even fired missiles to influence major elections in Taiwan, but failed every time. This time, it changed tactics. China found that it could use the Internet to easily mold public opinion and influence election results.

It is sure to follow the same recipe in the 2020 presidential and legislative elections. Between now and 2020, the DPP must work out how to counter China's interference.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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