

It is time for Taiwan to be Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating
Thursday, 27 December 2018 03:16

As the year draws to a close and President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) prepares for her next two years in office, it remains important for Taiwanese to continue to take stock of the nation's progress in democracy, and to observe and review the changing narratives that have accompanied it.

Taiwan's democratic progress can be framed into three distinct stages. Each stage in turn has had key events that impacted and shaped its direction.

The first stage, from 1945 to 1987, was the one-party state rule of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). That stage includes the initial exploitation of the island, and the period of White Terror and martial law.

It can further be divided into two phases, that of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) from 1945 until his death in April 1975 and that of Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) from 1975 until his death in January 1988.

In the Chiang Kai-shek phase, as the KMT fought the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War, the island was denuded of rice, steel and anything else that might help the KMT in its losing effort. When the KMT finally lost the war in 1949, many fled to Taiwan and proclaimed rule over the island.

Whether the communists could have pursued them like they did those that fled to Hainan is a debatable point. That possibility was eliminated when Mao Zedong (毛澤東) decided to enter the ongoing war on the Korean Peninsula and then-US president Harry Truman put the US' Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait.

The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty marked the "official end" of World War II, but it did not give Taiwan to the KMT and Chiang or Mao; Taiwan's status was left undetermined.

In turn, a more definitive blow to KMT dreams of a return to China happened later when the Republic of China (ROC) was cast out of the UN on Oct. 25, 1971.

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With UN General Assembly Resolution 2758, the UN clearly recognized the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate representative of China and voted "to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it." Taiwan, then under martial law, remained in its "undetermined" status.

In the Chiang Ching-kuo phase, the KMT's hopes for an ROC suffered a further blow, but not for Taiwan. The US extended its belated support for Resolution 2758 and moved its embassy from Taiwan to Beijing on Jan. 1, 1979.

Nonetheless, in keeping with Taiwan's undetermined status, the US also immediately created the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and set up the American Institute in Taiwan. The TRA recognized matters with these words, stating that the US terminated relations with "the governing authorities on Taiwan recognized by the United States as the Republic of China prior to January 1, 1979." The ROC was finally and officially dead as far as the US was concerned.

In December of the same year, Taiwanese who were *dangwai* (黨外, "outside the party") followed with human rights protests and promoted democracy in the Kaohsiung Incident.

Chiang Ching-kuo would finally lift martial law in July 1987, ending stage one. Upon his death on Jan. 13, 1988, his Taiwanese vice president, Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), took over to guide Taiwan through its transition stage to full democracy. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), formed in 1986, would soon become visibly active in politics.

The transition stage is marked by several developments as Taiwan moved to full democracy when the people could elect both the president and Legislative Yuan in 1996. Chief among these were the disbanding of the Taiwan Garrison Command and the ending of the "iron rice bowl" legislators of the ROC, ie, those who had not run for re-election since 1947. Taiwan also ended the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion (動員戡亂時期臨時條款).

In 1996, the final stage of full democracy began and Taiwan's two major parties took turns at

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the presidency over the years: the KMT's Lee Teng-hui, 1996 to 2000; the DPP's Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), 2000 to 2008; the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), 2008 to 2016; and the DPP's Tsai, 2016 to the present.

This marked Taiwan's full coming of age. Lee ironically was kicked out of the KMT and blamed for the party's 2000 election loss although he was not a candidate. This was also the age when Taiwan finally shook off the Stockholm syndrome of the past one-party state KMT rule.

The relevance of highlighting several key moments in these three stages is needed as many Taiwanese voters born from 1990 on often have little knowledge of all that created the democracy that they now enjoy.

However, this three-stage framing is not enough in itself. What is more important is a conscious realization of how the KMT's narrative progressively changed through each stage.

During the Chiang Kai-shek phase, the KMT narrative toward China was one of conquest: "first year prepare, second invade and third retake." Whether this was propaganda, hype or the party fully believed it is open to debate.

During the Chiang Ching-kuo phase, with Taiwan out of the UN and the US moving its embassy to Beijing, the KMT narrative became that of the three noes: no contact, no compromise and no negotiation.

However, these three noes broke down with the ending of martial law and permission was granted for KMT members to visit relatives in China.

In July 1999, Lee proposed a new narrative of "state to state" relations as the way a democratic Taiwan should view its relations with China, but the KMT refused to take that up as part of its narrative.

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Instead, in 2000, when the DPP took over the presidency, the KMT again shifted its narrative with then-Mainland Affairs Council chairman Su Chi's (蘇起) invention of the bogus "1992 consensus." The KMT narrative now reads "one China with two different interpretations."

Thus when seen in the eyes of history, it becomes clear that the KMT still clings to the dream of a resurrected or restored ROC. Linked to this is the KMT's desire to hang onto its stolen assets and avoid justice for its Martial Law era crimes.

This marks a dangerous period for Taiwan. The KMT's new "1992 consensus" narrative not only exposes its continued China-centric focus, but it also creates the possibility that some members might become quislings.

On the DPP side, the narrative has been unchanging in being Taiwan-centric. It first fought for democracy and now must fight for the survival of Taiwan as a democratic nation. Its problem is prioritizing the means and steps to achieve it and finding a way to express that in narrative form.

As Taiwanese look to the future, the question, therefore, is where do they as citizens want to go and how do they get there?

Taiwan has de facto independence; it was only the ROC and the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek that were evicted from the UN. Undetermined Taiwan has never been in the UN.

Taiwanese must also realize their assets. As a mid-sized nation, they are the Rock of Gibraltar between the East China Sea and the South China Sea. This is why hegemonic China covets Taiwan.

They must not sell themselves short; their economy might not be as desirable as they wish, but it is strong in comparison with most nations.

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They have witnessed that China cannot even grant a limited sense of democracy to the small territory of Hong Kong. Therefore is it not time to jettison the ROC name and Constitution that hang like an albatross on all that they do?

In this, they must determine what is the soul of their nation. How vital is democracy to it? What alliances do they want? What narrative and what priorities should be developed?

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