

Taiwan must assert itself in poll

Written by Jerome Keating
Thursday, 20 November 2014 07:15

With the Nov. 29 nine-in-one elections around the corner, Taiwanese have much to think about, as they tend to be cautious and discriminating in their choices. Those elected will influence internal affairs in the nation's major cities for the next four years, and care needs to be taken to select competent people who can both relate to and understand the needs of their electorate.

Obviously, candidates should be above corruption and cronyism, two things that have long plagued the nation's political life up to and throughout President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration. However, there is more. As the nation continues to grow and develop in these pivotal times, Taiwanese definitely need to choose officials who know, demonstrate and represent the Taiwanese vision and identity to the outside world.

So how do Taiwanese find and define the identity of their nation? This is challenging. The nation's identity has long been in formation throughout multiple colonial periods when the population faced rule by colonial powers, including the Dutch, Spanish, fleeing Ming, pursuing Qing, expanding Japanese and then a new fleeing Chinese group — the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) diaspora.

First and foremost, Taiwanese should reject the absurd and ludicrous claim that “we are all Chinese.” Instead a good start would be to compare and contrast the identity of Taiwan with two other territories that have also had a clear “Chinese influence,” namely Hong Kong and Singapore. Each has its own history and its own identity.

Hong Kong, now a special administrative region of China, has been in the news with its “Umbrella movement” and Occupy Central movement.

Hong Kong rose to prominence only when the British were granted treaty rights to it after the first Opium War from 1839 to 1842. As a Crown colony, Hong Kong competed with and quickly replaced the Portuguese-run Macau, which had for three centuries been the major point of access and trade with China. With that rise, Hong Kong's population has also boomed from a mere 7,000 to its present population of more than 7 million, 93 percent of whom are Chinese.

Taiwan must assert itself in poll

Written by Jerome Keating

Thursday, 20 November 2014 07:15

Although Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, 150 years of British control shaped Hong Kong's unique identity as a melting pot of East and West. Hong Kongers experienced the British education system and the British system of English common law. Similarly, Hong Kong was spared many of the problems that arose in China — from the Taiping Rebellion, to the 1911 overthrow, to the War Lord and Civil War periods.

Hong Kongers, with no need to idolize Mao Zedong (毛泽东), could watch from the sidelines as China suffered through the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and more. All these experiences have allowed them the ability to differentiate themselves and their history from the haughty “locusts” that they now find regularly crossing their borders. While the “one country, two systems” policy supposedly allows them control over almost everything but foreign affairs and military defense, Hong Kongers are now clearly aware of the facile deceit embedded in that promise. All this factors into the Umbrella movement and why Hong Kongers do not blithely say: “We are all Chinese.”

Singapore's identity is also unique. This city-state's key location at one end of the Strait of Malacca meant it became a trade post as early as the third and fourth century BC. It reached a peak of prominence in the 13th century from which it then gradually fell into decline. However, in 1819, Stamford Raffles purchased it for the British East India Company and revitalized it. This led to it becoming a part of the British Empire in 1824 and a crucial British naval base and trading post that eventually became Britain's “Gibraltar of the East.” Today it is a major global financial center, commercial hub and port. It has a population of about 5.5 million, 75 percent of whom are Chinese, and Mandarin is one of its four official languages.

Singapore certainly experienced the influence of the British education system and its schools still use English as the main language of instruction. Its legal system likewise has its roots in the English legal system. In 1959 when Singapore became a self-governing part of the British Commonwealth, it was promised freedom in everything except foreign affairs and military defense. In this, unlike China's similar promise to Hong Kong, Britain kept its word.

Singapore has had many other unique turns in its history. With Malaysia, it fought off a Chinese communist insurgency in the 1950s, and in 1963 it declared independence from the British Commonwealth. It joined the Federation of Malaysia only to be expelled from it two years later for various reasons, including the Malay fear of an overtly Chinese influence. From then on Singapore had to go it on its own and continued its rise to the prominence and identity it has today.

Taiwan must assert itself in poll

Written by Jerome Keating

Thursday, 20 November 2014 07:15

In the 1970s, when Taiwan, under the leadership of the Chiang scion, forbade relations with China, Singapore established diplomatic contact with China that later led to full diplomatic relations in the 1990s and a free-trade agreement in 2008. Singapore of course has had the luxury of distance from China in this and has balanced its relationship with China with a strong relationship with the US, particularly in defense.

Taiwan, with a much larger population of 23 million, stands in contrast to both Hong Kong and Singapore and has its own unique history. Nonetheless, as it continues to develop its identity, Taiwan can still learn from Hong Kong and Singapore, and the problems and pitfalls that those two have had in forging their identities. Taiwanese also need to realize that in addition to being an island nation, they are already one of the major mid-sized nations in the world. They control their foreign relations and military defense; they have achieved a hard-won democracy and enjoy a prominent economic position in the world. They even train Singapore's military.

So, though they face continued attempts by China to marginalize them, there is no reason for them to bemoan their position. Instead, in next week's crucial elections, the nation needs people who can say: "We are all Taiwanese, let's get this done."

Jerome Keating is a writer based in Taipei.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2013/11/20](#)