

Times in Taiwan 'Are a-Changin'

Written by Wayne Pajunen

Thursday, 18 December 2014 08:03

Bob Dylan sang in his song The Times They Are a-Changin: "Come gather 'round people, wherever you roam ... you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, for the times they are a-changin'."

This year is likely to be remembered as the year young people in the Sunflower movement spurred independent candidate Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) to win the Taipei mayoral election and rocked the nation's political paradigm to the core.

To understand the magnitude of this political shift, one must start by looking at the arrival of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in 1945 after the Japanese lost World War II, ending 50 years of colonial rule.

The US allowed the KMT to occupy Taiwan despite then-US president Harry Truman's declaration that "the Chiangs (蔣), the Kungs (蔣) and the Soongs (宋) [were] all thieves," having taken US\$750 million in US aid.

It was from this time on that the KMT enforced its own brand of dominance over Taiwan and its naive citizenry.

For many generations Taiwanese lived in fear of their government. From 1895 to 1987 they were subservient to their Japanese and then KMT overlords. When former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) began reforms which led him to become the nation's first democratically elected president in 1996, it was the beginning of the end of 100 years of tyranny for the descendants of the early Chinese immigrants and Aborigines.

Though the nation became a full-fledged democracy, it is still in the development stages and the buds of democracy must be nurtured to guarantee true universal suffrage, but changing the "status quo" is left to a blind government, which seems impervious to public demand for change.

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The KMT's abuse of power has not been lost on Taiwanese, which it dubbed "taike" (inferior low-class Taiwanese).

Government corruption and graft are ubiquitous. Through decades of martial law and brutal suppression there was nothing anyone could do about it without disappearing off the face of the Earth or ending up incarcerated.

A century of suppression represses the spirit of a people; they no longer speak their mind for they sadly succumb and learn to suppress their needs, desires and emotions.

These years of repression coupled with the Chinese culture of Confucianism and its filial respect for authority and seniority allowed the KMT to have their way with the slavish people and resources of Taiwan.

However, with the turn of the millennium one key dynamic in this equation changed.

A new generation of citizens aged from 20 to 35 years old came of voting age, a generation who never experienced the era of the KMT's repression and fear modus operandi; hence they do not kowtow to such a government.

It is also a generation with social media at its fingertips and access to advances in technology previously unseen. Unlike past generations, which were forbidden to know about social changes around the world, serenaded by Dylan or The Beatles, this modern generation grew up witnessing and relating to the freedom of the world outside.

They gleefully embraced a new path and used media to demonstrate their civic pride. They are able to organize and advertise with the tap of a finger, or even expose government secrecy and wrongdoings.

So unafraid of the KMT are they that they stormed the legislature and peacefully occupied its

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main chamber for more than three weeks while the Sunflower movement was in full bloom.

Through social media the world watched and waited for the KMT to once again to rear its ugly authoritarian head and stifle the will of the taike, but the government, restrained by peering social media, refrained. The young people were emboldened, they were able to speak their minds, the times were "a-changin'."

Then came last month's elections, and in Taipei the KMT, with blinders fixed and a mountain of cash in hand, forged ahead with their authoritarian ways.

Nominated to maintain its grip on the crown jewel of the nation's municipalities, Taipei, was Sean Lien (連戰), the son of former vice president and former KMT chairman Lien Chan (連戰), and a lifelong public servant who had somehow become extremely wealthy along the way.

The princeling Sean Lien also proved to be another KMT bumbler in the mold of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), as Ma was described by the Economist in 2012, when it came to his apparent off-the-cuff policy platforms that were ridiculed by both the public at large and even dyed-in-the-wool KMT apparatchiks.

During six years of Ma's administration, the KMT's credibility has diminished following one misdeed after another, and with young people leading the way, the swing voters of Taipei, Greater Taichung, Taoyuan County and other cities and counties switched allegiances for the first time in history (without the KMT vote being split as in Taipei in 1994).

The KMT was broken and in the Nov. 29 elections the opposition reaped a landslide victory with 7,264,957 votes to the KMT's 4,990,677. The unprecedented results left the KMT with only one razor-thin victory, by New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu (朱立倫), from the nine major cities across the nation.

Post election, "there was a Cabinet reshuffle, the premier stepped down, but the same people remain in the Cabinet; the only change is the vice premier taking over as premier," former president Lee said in the Taipei Times.

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The old stalwarts of the KMT appear unable or unwilling to change their ways so detested by the populace and are hearing predictions of a coming decade or more of political exile such as that which the KMT bestowed on many of their critics during the Martial Law era.

On Friday last week, Chu, the lone victor for the KMT, said: "A dysfunctional political system, and nepotism and cronyism ... have plagued affairs," adding that "the dark sides of a market economy and capitalism have emerged in Taiwan."

Chu, who is running for KMT chairman, said the party needs to draw lessons from the bitter loss by thoroughly reviewing its "general line" and policies, because the people's anger expressed through the ballot box was "vicious."

Is the party that lead the nation to become one of the so-called Asian Tigers ready to change its stripes, as Chu suggests, or is it simply more platitudes to mollify short term memories? Only time will tell.

What is certain though, whether the KMT adapts to the new realities or not, is that the nation is transitioning through a paradigm shift, but as Dylan cautioned in his song: "Come writers and critics, who prophesize with your pen, and keep your eyes wide, the chance won't come again, and don't speak too soon, for the wheel's still in spin, and there's no tellin' who, that it's namin', for the loser now, will be later to win, for the times they are a-changin'."

One thing for certain is that Taiwanese will be a-watchin', a-strategizin', a-workin' and a-hopin'.

Wayne Pajunen is a political analyst and commentator.

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