

Left-wing parties light the third way

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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With a third political force preparing to enter the nation's political arena in next year's legislative elections, there is hope that the political newcomers will gradually drive the main political parties to compete on a left-right spectrum, and not just the unification-versus-independence fault line that has long divided the nation's politics.

Unlike advanced democracies where political parties tend to be divided by a left-right dichotomy, the political environment in Taiwan has long been split into two camps on the question of political relations with China, predominantly occupied by divisions along the lines of ethnicity and national identity.

The absence of an efficacious left-wing political party in the contemporary history of Taiwan can be partly attributed to the trajectory of its economic development since 1949 — in conjunction with the anti-communist atmosphere sparked by the Cold War, and the suppression of left-wing thoughts during the decades-long White Terror era — that has been deeply embedded with the neoliberal global capitalist system in Taiwan as a semi-periphery country.

Ever since the political climate became more liberated in the 1970s, the question of whether Taiwan should become an independent nation or seek unification with China has been the most important issue for the main political parties.

While it is not exactly correct to say that there is no left-wing party in Taiwan, the nation's history has nurtured a society that has been dominated for much of the period by conservative, right-wing leaders and parties. The parties widely perceived to be left-wing, for example the Labor Party and the Green Party, hold little weight in the political process.

Among the four main political parties, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is often seen as more left-wing than the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), but there are actually no significant differences between the two parties with respect to major socioeconomic issues. In some prominent reform issues related to the taxation of capital gains, the DPP's proposed policy is even more lenient than that of the KMT toward the rich and large corporations.

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The Taiwan Solidarity Union and the People First Party, the other two political parties that narrowly passed the 5 percent threshold in the party vote in the legislative election in 2012 to become eligible to win legislator-at-large seats, seldom revealed left-wing leanings.

At a time when there is growing public dissatisfaction over inequality and the injustice that characterizes neoliberal capitalism in Taiwan, like elsewhere in the world, the nation has seen a resurgence in social movements, culminating in last year's Sunflower movement. Apart from the economic dimension, one of the demands of the movement — for greater public participation in politics — has further associated it with left-wing politics.

Arguably encouraged by the election of Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) in November last year — whose ascendancy has been interpreted in some quarters as signaling the emergence of a third political force — several new political parties have emerged: The recently formed New Power Party, the soon-to-be-established Social Democratic Party, and a party with a left-wing agenda advocating Taiwanese independence, are all offshoots of the movement and position themselves on the left of the political spectrum. How the third force might disrupt the binary political landscape is something worth looking forward to.

It is too early to tell whether the new parties will be a viable third force, but they can certainly help enlighten debates on public policy, which are all too rare in the country's polarized and partisan climate centered on issues of unification and independence.

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