

Why the sky did not fall on Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating
Thursday, 26 May 2016 07:34

The recent inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) went off without a hitch. This marked the third transition of power since Taiwanese began electing their president in 1996 and there was no question, it was peaceful.

Taiwan has come a long way since its people threw off the one-party state baggage that had been foisted on them at the end of World War II. However, as true as this is, the inauguration also provided the nation a good opportunity to do a reality check and make a comparison between their democracy and China, their one-party state neighbor, on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

For sure, despite the smoothness of the transition of power, numerous ironies were in the air.

First, Taiwan only has official diplomatic relations with 22 nations; however, surprisingly, more than 700 foreign visitors representing 59 nations spent time, effort and money to attend and to help celebrate Tsai's inauguration. Why were so many nations with "unofficial" ties joining the celebration?

In addition, just before the inauguration, and probably with pressure from the People's Republic of China (PRC), the WHO sent its annual invitation to the World Health Assembly.

However, this time it made the specific point of reminding Taiwan that the WHO had a nebulous "one China" policy.

Despite this, and much to the presumed consternation of the PRC, not one of the representatives of the 59 nations in attendance at the inauguration, many of which have their own "one China" policy, asked the PRC for permission to come. One could say the question never even entered their minds.

This irony was made stronger by the fact that for months before the inauguration, numerous pundits had been expostulating about what Tsai would say in her inaugural address.

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Like Chicken Little, the outgoing Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) was part of this; it spread dire warnings that the sky would definitely fall if Tsai did not use its fabricated magical term, the so-called “1992 consensus,” nor repeat the vague canard of “one China,” a canard for which only China’s interpretation counts.

Nonetheless, Tsai did not mention the “1992 consensus” or “one China” and surprisingly, the sky did not fall as many had either predicted or hoped that it would.

Instead, Tsai mentioned the name “Taiwan” repeatedly; she did it so much that it left little doubt that she was talking about the implied name of the nation she was in, a nation where the people elect their leader.

For this reason, the one-party state on the other side of the Taiwan Strait did not join in the celebrations. Taiwan’s democracy was obviously not measuring up to what its hegemonic dream of a red-chambered world is and this immediately drew a negative evaluation.

In Taipei, business went on as usual. Students went to school, people went to work and many others watched events on TV. Most, if not all, did not seem to worry that the sky would fall no matter what Tsai said.

For the KMT, which had consistently advocated that Tsai mention its proposed magic “1992 consensus” to keep the sky in place, disappointment was evident.

The KMT has still not figured out the changes taking place in Taiwan and that Taiwanese have been saying: “We voted you out in November 2014 and in January, because you delivered the wrong message and practices.”

For the PRC, at bedrock, it was also clearly a matter of discourse between a democracy and a one-party state.

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To the PRC, the Taiwanese were saying: “When we vote, we vote for what we see is best for our nation; we don’t look for outsiders’ approval or disapproval; that is what democracy is all about.”

However, there was more.

Tsai mentioned working with fellow democracies, such as long-time ally the US, and working more in particular with close neighbor Japan. In support, Japan sent a delegation of more than 250 people who seemed to like the green sky that they saw developing over Taiwan. This left little doubt that Japan’s democracy is closely linked to a healthy democracy in Taiwan.

The impact of these events then carried over to Hong Kong, where both sides watch each other’s democratic developments. The PRC’s simple 1997 promise to let Hong Kong have free democratic elections for its leader in 20 years has just about expired; which has left little trust in one-party states and their promises.

Instead of hope for free elections, Hong Kongers are now facing more repression; even their freedom of speech is threatened, as illustrated by the arrest of individuals linked to a Hong Kong bookseller not advocating the right message.

In China, the many minions who were protesting Taiwan’s “insolence” either purposely ignored or were unsure of the proper way to talk about their own past. The 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution came and went and there was little done to mark it. There was not even mourning for all those that died and the horror that this had wrought on the country as China’s one-party state solidified its power.

Discourse in the one-party state had been stymied, for the affair left the Chinese politburo with little justification for its rule. The people had not elected present-day leaders, and the claim of the leaders to have fought in the Cultural Revolution on any side also had little merit.

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Back in Taiwan, at the end of the day, Taiwanese can now freely evaluate what the fuss was all about. Life in Taiwan has gone on. The cries of Chicken Little proved to be nothing; and stronger ties with close neighbor Japan have developed. That will be invaluable in the event of any attack on Taiwan.

Finally, the question of interest in a one-party state never came up.

If it did, Taiwan's response would have been: "Been there, done that; thanks, but no thanks. Our democracy was won from the KMT with blood, sweat and tears, so is there any reason to think that a new one-party state would be any more desirable?"

As for the pundits, well they had a different problem; they might have to search for a new catchphrase to replace "1992 consensus."

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