

Whether one looks at the practice of democracy in Taiwan or in the US, this year will definitely go down as a historic one, if only because of the presidential elections in each nation.

In Taiwan, this year marked the first time in its history that the public elected a female president, namely Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This happened even though the DPP had been out of power for the previous eight years.

Taiwan also held a further surprise as the party in power, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), switched its candidate midstream in the election campaign. The KMT had first approved and endorsed Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) and then late in the game decided that Eric Chu (朱立倫) was a more electable candidate and drafted him.

However, these surprises are proving to be nothing in comparison to the escalating situation and theatrics in the US. There, things are becoming even more hectic, especially since the US is reputed to be an established democracy.

In the US, a media blitz continues to build and roll on as representatives of the two major parties contend for the presidency. Insults, innuendo, accusations, lies and barbs are flying across the airwaves from both sides.

Depending on how one looks at it, the basic choice for president that the people now have is between the “lewd and politically inexperienced” Donald Trump, a man whose main claims to leadership genius rest on his bombastic boast that he profits from bankruptcies while hiding his tax returns.

On the other side, his opponent, whom he has dubbed “crooked,” Hillary Rodham Clinton is a person with vast political experience and one whose life for the past two decades has repeatedly been gone over with a fine-tooth comb.

Yet, despite such public examination, she has maintained a Teflon-like ability so that none of

the accusations have ever resulted in proven charges.

This rolling US media circus continues and has caused many to question the merits of democracy if after more than two centuries in the US, all that its democracy has led to is a choice between two such candidates. Some are thus tempted to look with questioning eyes to the potential merits of a one-party state where things are at least more efficient in a prearranged way and all this hoopla is avoided.

If such doubts linger about the limited merits of the one-party state, perhaps those in the US and around the world could take a step back and learn something from the new kid on the block, the fledgling democracy of Taiwan.

Taiwan is a nation that has already experienced 40-plus years of one-party state rule and one of the key values it has gleaned is the importance of knowing both sides. In this it has the comparative value provided by having a free press, a keystone of democracy. For it is Taiwan's free press that has allowed its citizens to examine, question and challenge any and all interpretations of the nation's history that are presented.

This importance of openly debating history cannot be ignored. It is brought out in George Orwell's prophetic book, 1984, where the protagonist, Winston Smith, finds himself employed by his one-party state's Ministry of Truth, or "Minitrue" in Newspeak. His job for the ministry is to rewrite history so that it conforms to the spin and desires of the current leadership. He has done this so many times that he has lost track of whatever actually happened in time.

With Smith's experience in mind, Taiwanese know they have been through the mill and they know that they have the ability to debate and correct their history from the past one-party state interpretation that the "colonial" KMT brought with it as it fled China.

This is not all. Taiwanese can also look across the Taiwan Strait at their neighbor and watch how in that one-party state, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) imitates 1984 as it constantly tries to spin and rewrite history.

When it comes to history, the alleged strength that any one-party state possesses is its control of the media; with that it can magnify its own accomplishments and minimize any defects.

For example, while the CCP had promised Hong Kong that it would have free elections by next year, it has chosen to ignore that vow and shifted its attention to bookstore owners and publishers who give different opinions. It can cast them as threats to national security and so arrest them.

When asked about the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the CCP media response similarly continues to imply that it never really was as bad as others say, and the protest certainly was not put down with so many “implied deaths.”

A similar development is recently found in the treatment of China’s Cultural Revolution, which had its 50th anniversary.

The CCP has not quite figured out how to properly spin the Cultural Revolution, so this massive devastation is being ignored and portrayed as a minor blip in history, hardly worth a mention.

Taiwan’s media are still in the developmental stage and may be given on occasion to hype popular fashion. Nevertheless, it still is a free press and continues to present to the public the multiple sides of any story at the same time.

Conscious of its history, Taiwanese can remember how “Bo Yang” (楊逵) spent nearly 10 years on Green Island for a Popeye cartoon during the KMT’s one-party state era. They do not want that to happen again.

In any democracy, it is the responsibility of the media to inform and to inform correctly. On the consumer side, it is the responsibility of the readers and, of course, the voters in a democracy, to insist on being correctly informed. In common parlance, that means they must be prepared to “fact check” not only those interviewed, but also what is reported.

Taiwanese have gone through the wringer from one-party state to democracy; they now even have debates between presidential candidates. From history, Taiwanese know the one-party state and its controlled media, which is why it is ludicrous to them that anyone would even contemplate responding to any siren call of efficiency that a one-party state might offer.

This, however, does not resolve the issues in the US presidential debates. In that case, Taiwanese can only sit back and watch its big brother, saying: "We weathered the storm of our presidential selection in 2016, we hope that you can as well."

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