

Taiwan has enjoyed a full, flourishing multiparty democracy since 1996, when — in addition to the legislature — the people directly elected the president.

Yet, of course, like most multiparty systems, two main parties — the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) — have tended to dominate, especially in the presidential elections.

However, many might be surprised to know that in the legislative elections, Taiwan's multiparty democracy does have numerous active parties that want to and do compete. For example, in the 2016 elections, more than 26 parties, not including independents, put forth candidates for the 113-seat legislature.

Most of these parties, of course, have a “narrow-focus platform,” whose main purpose is to call the public's attention to particular needs or wishes. The Trees Party and Peace Pigeon Union Party are two good examples.

While that is part of democracy, it still remains difficult for these alternative “third” parties to survive or exert much influence.

However, some third parties have survived and have even had moments of strength and glory. These are usually spin-offs of the two major parties and an examination of their development provides an interesting record of Taiwan's changing and developing national identity.

The first major spin-off, as might be expected, came from the dominant and former one-party state, the KMT. In 1993, the New Party was formed by several KMT members, who even at that time felt that amid the growing democracy, the party was losing sight of the goal of eventual unification with China. They also ironically felt that despite the party's long tradition of former presidents Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國), then-president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) was too autocratic.

Third parties and Mammon factor

Written by Jerome Keating
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The New Party peaked in the year 1995, when it captured 21 seats in the legislature with 13 percent of the vote, but from that time on it has slowly gone downhill in terms of votes and representation.

The New Party's most amusing moment was when it nominated now-deceased political commentator Li Ao (李敖) as its presidential candidate in 2000. Li, a man always drawn to the limelight, accepted, but refused to join the party and ended up urging people to vote for his opponent, then-independent candidate James Soong (宋楚瑜).

New Party hopes for mainstream recognition were completely dashed when the KMT replaced its presidential primary winner, Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱), in the 2016 elections. Hung's beliefs perfectly fit the New Party's platform, but she was seen as unelectable and replaced with Eric Chu (朱立倫), who got only 31 percent of the total vote.

A much more formidable split within the KMT came with the People First Party (PFP) led by Soong. This division focused more on competent leadership than any platform issues. A majority of party members felt Soong was the KMT's best candidate for president in the 2000 elections, but then-vice president Lien Chan (連戰) would not give up what he felt was his rightful place.

Soong was expelled from the KMT and ran as an independent. In that election he gained 36.8 percent of the vote, losing by less than 3 percentage points to the DPP's Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) 39.3 percent. Soon afterward, Soong formed the PFP.

Lien, it should be noted, received a mere 23 percent of the vote, despite Lee winning 54 percent of the vote in 1996, even with other KMT candidates running against him.

What was most telling here was that the majority of the KMT favored Soong and he probably would have won if KMT hardliners had not accused him of laundering money in the Chung Hsing Bills Finance Corp scandal in the run-up to the election.

Soong's leadership rejection remains one of those "what if" moments in Taiwanese history.

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What if the KMT had rejected Lien's claim to the leadership? What if Lien did the noble thing and stepped down for the party? Soong would have clearly won in 2000, and given his ability to share power and distribute wealth with all parties, he would surely have been re-elected in 2004.

Lee, not Lien, was blamed for this failure and drummed out of the party, while Lien — the loser he supposedly supported — ironically led the charge.

This election revealed the complex tapestry that makes up the KMT, with its waishengren [外省人, people who came from China with the KMT after the Chinese Civil War] and benshengren [本省人, those who came to Taiwan before World War II], as well as “stolen state asset” members, “hankering for unification” members and its “blind-follower” members. It has continually had trouble establishing a Taiwan-centric focus.

KMT members would do well to require all leaders to undergo a visible paired weighting evaluation regarding the numerous issues involved in an election to sort out the wheat from the chaff. They might well find that at the deep heart of the party is what can be called the Mammon factor.

Soong is no longer a viable threat, though he still has some influence and gained 12.8 percent of the vote in the 2016 presidential election against 31 percent for the KMT's Chu. The problem the PFP always faces is that it is both cut off from the assets of the KMT and it has been totally dependent on Soong's one-man leadership.

The Taiwan Solidarity Union on the other hand was formed in 2001 on the other side of the aisle and is part of the pan-green alliance. It sees Lee, the expelled KMT leader, as its spiritual leader and stands as a counterbalance to the New Party. It supports the idea of Taiwan's de jure nationhood, from which would follow representation in the UN.

With this narrow focus, the Taiwan Solidarity Union is not destined to a long life. It garnered three seats in the 2012 legislature after getting 8.96 percent of the vote, but lost out to the New Power Party (NPP) in 2016, when it did not reach the required 5 percent for proportional representation.

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The NPP is the new kid on the block and is clearly the party to watch. It is Taiwan-centric and does not represent a narrow focus; it also does not rely on one leader. Furthermore, with an audience in the growing youth vote and its ability to challenge the DPP whenever that party is seen as not doing enough for the nation, it has the best potential for growth.

The NPP does not yet have a large enough voting block outside the main cities, but the fact that it captured three elected seats in the 2016 Legislative Yuan plus two more legislator-at-large seats supports its growth possibilities.

While it is unlikely that the NPP will be strong enough to contend in the year-end nine-in-one elections, it should be watched on how it fares in the 2020 legislative elections.

In future elections, two key issues stand out that all parties, spin-offs included, will have to face and address. They are the bogus “1992 consensus” and the KMT’s “stolen” state assets. Both obviously affect the KMT the most.

Like the Roman Papacy, which used the fabricated Donation of Constantine to try to legitimize its claim to power over Europe in the 8th century, the KMT also claims the fabricated “1992 consensus” to justify that it should be the party that represents Taiwan in dealing with China.

Historically this term was invented by Su Chi (蘇起) in 2000, when the DPP won the presidency for the first time. This victory meant that from that time on the KMT would have less control over the narrative of Taiwan. The “1992 consensus” was created to forestall that as well as to promote a false narrative.

Lee, who was president and KMT chairman from 1988 to 2000, has consistently denied it ever took place. All that happened in 1992 was that parties from the two sides of the Taiwan Strait met and agreed to recognize each nation’s university degrees and to accept and deliver mail. To claim a consensus beyond that would be dishonest to the nation.

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The second issue that all parties, but in particular the KMT, must address is which individuals and corporations still possess or control the profits and stolen state assets of the KMT's one-party-state days. Transparency continues to be lacking here. Even within the KMT many rank-and-file members not only do not know whose bank accounts govern these assets, but they also fear that neither they nor the nation will ever regain them.

This is the Mammon factor where, as in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, certain KMT members, driven from China, follow the suggestion of Mammon that the best way to make a "heaven of their hell" is to secretly control the wealth from the stolen state assets above all else.

At the heart of this is why Soong was kept from being the KMT's leader and why the party cannot develop adequate new leaders. In the minds of those involved, the final aim of the state would be to hide, solidify and justify the past profits gained in the hands of certain families.

That goal will never be good for the growth of the nation nor even the KMT. As they say, the KMT must fall for Taiwan to survive. No spin-off can help it.

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