

Analyzing the DPP election debacle

Written by Bruce Jacobs 簡

Monday, 26 November 2018 04:52

The dramatic Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) defeat in Saturday's local elections has surprised everyone on both sides of politics. The elections were very much a chance for the electorate to evaluate the DPP central government and voters found the government wanting.

The massive Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) defeats in the local elections in 2014 and the presidential and legislative elections of 2016 have not been reversed because the KMT has failed to reform itself.

It has failed to determine how it wishes to face the voters and it did not have a unified team of candidates pushing particular programs. Rather, it had disparate candidates who emphasized local concerns and did not present any strong ideas on issues such as national identity.

Young voters, who overwhelmingly identify as "Taiwanese" and "not Chinese," voted for the KMT because of issues such as economic growth and many voters also cast ballots for change. Thus, in Kaohsiung, where the DPP had governed for 20 years, the KMT won an excellent victory, despite the quirkiness of KMT mayor-elect Han Kuo-yu (韓 國瑜).

Experience in Taiwan and other democracies shows that voters frequently turn out governments after 20 consecutive years in office.

The only alternative to the KMT and the DPP is the New Power Party, which has not developed sufficiently to be a proper opposition party.

Thus, the elections were a poll on how the DPP government is performing. The government has become so cautious that it appears paralyzed. Even in a relative achievement such as the Labor Standards Act (勞 基法), the government failed by giving the bill a title that made no sense in Chinese. This suggests an inability to implement basic aspects of key legislation reform.

The government could also have used the Council of Grand Justices ruling that same-sex marriage does not conflict with the Constitution and then easily passed a bill in the legislature,

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which it controls with a substantial majority.

Instead, it was frightened by threats from the Presbyterian Church, which went against the standpoint of the international Presbyterian Church. Its members would not have voted for the KMT anyway.

Similarly, the government was afraid of threats from evangelicals, many of whom would not have voted for the DPP.

Christians account for only 5 to 6 percent of the electorate. In succumbing to the threats of the churches, the government lost the support of many young voters.

Another failure was the execution of a prisoner.

It is true that many people in Taiwan believe the death penalty stops murders, but no one in government or in the community of non-governmental organizations has explained that this is simply not true. The government failed to explain to Taiwanese that jurisdictions without the death penalty have lower murder rates than places that do have it.

Yet, again, young voters who support human rights voted for the KMT to express dissatisfaction with the government's actions.

Can the DPP turn this situation around before the presidential and legislative elections in 2020?

DPP heads have rolled following the KMT victory, including that of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英), who stepped down as DPP chairperson, and Chen Chu (陳), who resigned as Presidential Office secretary-general. Premier William Lai's (賴) resignation has still not been accepted.

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Such resignations to accept responsibility for electoral defeat are customary on both sides of Taiwanese politics, but who will replace these people? Will true reformers come into power and will they be allowed to act?

Will the DPP blood a new generation? People like Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) have made great contributions to the DPP in the past, but why are new people not being nominated? In many countries, national leaders are in their 30s and 40s. Why is Taiwan a leader in gerontocracy?

If the DPP had not let Pasuya Yao (游錫堃) run in Taipei, it could have maintained its close informal alliance with Ko Wen-je (柯文哲). Instead, it was a knife-edge election with Ko winning by less than 3,000 votes.

Yao only obtained one in six votes. Has Yao's candidacy badly damaged the informal alliance between the DPP and Ko?

If the DPP can restructure and implement the reforms that young people — Taiwan's future — seek, then it still has a good chance in the 2020 elections, as the KMT is still not unified. Overall, the KMT did not win seats; rather, the DPP lost them, because it has lost the confidence of voters.

Even KMT leaders admit that the DPP government is still in a much better position than the Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) government after the 2014 local elections.

Can the DPP government turn around its disastrous administrative performance? Or will it slide to a massive defeat in 2020, even as the KMT continues to fail to reform?

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2018/11/26](#)