Since the January 2016 election, the issue of transitional justice has been a central plank of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) claim that the "will of the Taiwanese people" would henceforth generate significant change in most walks of life. At issue for Aborigines were land and hunting rights, gun ownership, nuclear waste storage (Orchid Island; Lanyu, □□) and community autonomy in local governance.

President Tsai Ing-wen's (□□□) formal apology in August 2016 to Aborigines for previous treatment under the KMT and the longer "four centuries of pain and mistreatment" would lead to the immediate formation of new agencies and new laws.

Will this directly influence Aboriginal politics and voting in a few weeks' time? It is surely more likely that any significant shift in the old alignments, whereby the Aboriginal vote commonly favored the KMT, would depend on some complex mix of three elements in the general political scene.

First, the perception that the DPP administration has lacked effective reform remains widespread; second, the older KMT bias might be reduced by the shock of smaller parties widening voter choice and a broadening of the issues evidenced in last year's nine-in-one elections; third, the system of reserved legislative seats for Aborigines might more than ever reveal or alter complex local dynamics — possibly highlighting localist factors, especially among young adults.

However, it could also be argued that this combination of forces might reduce the powers of ethnicity and community allegiance in Aboriginal voting behavior and increase the likelihood of a greater general politicization, with more focus on a range of policies and "national" issues.

Does comparative history provide some clue to possible longer-term outcomes?

In most cases, the borders between Aborigines and the national societies that dominate their frontiers and territories also mark the limits of ideology. This does not mean that Aborigines cannot be staunch democrats or liberals or environmentalists or socialists and so on, but rather that, in most situations in the past, Aboriginal political issues have been very immediate, very

important and not especially inhibited by ideological disputes within such communities. Much more important is the chronic and universal absence of adequate funding and planning coming from central governments.

Around the world, national priorities and budgets generally do not meet the needs of local Aboriginal politics.

It seems to follow that all should be wary when Aboriginal affairs become a matter of party politics, because ideologues and demagogues alike always play games of their own construction, and the ones that they have grown up with and succeeded within. A failure to be cautious here has strewn Aboriginal history in Taiwan with crises and misunderstandings of such a complexity that most historians still fail to comprehend or capture them.

From at least the time of the Dutch colonial occupation (1624-1662) onward, it was the Chinese, the Spaniards, the Dutch and later Westerners, and then the Japanese from 1895, who between them consolidated the distinctions between lowland or western plains Aborigines and the eastern Aborigines of the forests and mountains.

The terms used for the Aborigines were hardly polite — highland savages, “raw” or barbaric versus lowland tribes “cooked” or civilized — and were certainly likely to confound the existing social and environmental problems faced by all Aborigines within the long historical process that pushed their settlements and livelihoods further and further toward the difficult — often treacherous — eastern coasts of Taiwan.

The fact that the lowland Aborigines could be defined as “civilized” because they had intermarried, learned other languages and taken over cultural forms from all these foreign elements, including the far-Westerners of Europe and the US, did not mean that they had automatically become liberal or democratic (or indeed racist) ideologues, and this was certainly even more true of their eastern counterparts, who so resisted the encroachments on them well into the 1930s.

The fact that the brilliant guerrilla warriors from Tayal or other more eastern communities could be forced into Japanese battalions in World War II does not in any way mean that they became cryptofascists or extreme nationalists or upholders of a Greater East Asian Co-prosperity

Sphere (□□□□□□) of the commanding Japanese ideology. They did not become ideologues.

In several ways things have changed considerably, spurred by tourism and fundamental technological advances, but even some cursory thought leads one to the conclusion that the Taiwanese Aboriginal vote is unlikely to be attracted to ideologues, but to be much more clearly won in battles over very immediate matters concerning village and township environmental safety and infrastructure, educational provisions for the young, welfare and health needs of the old, protection and usage of traditional languages, and the possibilities for increased employment among all peoples of the eastern areas — the only way that Aboriginal communities might be maintained long-term.

To this end, should Aboriginal policies — indeed all major policies impinging on eastern Aboriginal residents — not be outcomes of cross-party forums and non-ideological thinking? This is par excellence an area for the loosening up of unproductive distinctions between pan-blues and pan-greens, conservatives and liberals, the Taiwanese who are from post-1945 settlement as against those of much longer lineage, or the voting patterns of north versus south.

Party politics and discourse is the backbone of all major democracies, but this does not mean that it is an optimal mechanism for all policy arenas. There are some areas of concern where even in a two-party system, parliamentary governance might well consider systematic cross-party cooperation.

In Taiwan, such issues should include five key issues: relations with China, urban social improvement, the fight against political corruption, general environmental issues, and Aboriginal welfare, employment and culture.

Possibly opportunistically, Tsai, the leader of the DPP way back in January 2012 and its new presidential candidate at that time, did raise the wider issue of generating some form of “consociational democratic system” — that is, a system in which even where one party does have a clear majority in all houses of government, the major parties cooperate and come together institutionally in the face of divisions that are strong enough over some issues to split the system and potentially destroy democracy.

If all five of the issues isolated above are placed together, then there is a very large and important policy arena in which the elements have natural affinities — it is so clear that environmental policies must overlap very strongly with policies for Aborigines, and so on.

There is a second possible advantage of new civilities — conjoint discussions and decisions on Aboriginal matters, the environment and education might act as sites for the development of relations and critical-learning processes between the KMT and the DPP, and between them and the growing new parties, particularly the NPP and the TPP.

Through such associational civilities a new democratic urge might grow. Brexit Britain shows what happens when the opposite tendency becomes dominant and threatens the implosion of parliamentary processes.

However, this very ambitious form of pursuing democracy has so far not caught on in Taiwan. It might be attempted again by Tsai if the DPP squeezes through the present turmoil.

The nation might need to settle for the pursuance of each of such issues in forums designed across party lines and ad hoc, but even this would be far better than overplaying the first of these issues — China, especially as now escalated by events in Hong Kong — at the expense of the others, or raising them only on ideological grounds when the snatching of some short-term political opportunity demands it.

Ian Inkster is a professorial research associate at the Centre of Taiwan Studies, SOAS, University of London; a senior fellow in the Taiwan Studies Program, China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham; and the editor of the international journal History of Technology.

Source: Taipei Times - Editorials 2019/12/21