

Local politics confuses newcomers

Written by Andy Smith

Tuesday, 21 January 2020 08:43

Despite being ranked as one of the most “free” countries in Asia, and boasting a democratic system many other nations can only dream of, there are many things in the world of Taiwanese politics that baffle outsiders at first glance.

Here are a few examples of things in Taiwanese politics that do not readily make sense to someone like me — a foreigner.

One, the national flag.

A simple “thought experiment”: Picture a well-known national flag. Let us take the US national flag, the Stars and Stripes. Now, instead of the stars in the top-left corner, imagine the logo of US President Donald Trump’s Republican Party (a red and blue elephant) in its place. Or, take Japan’s national flag, but instead of its distinctive red circle, imagine the logo of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party taking pride of place in the center of the flag. It just seems wrong, doesn’t it?

Taiwan’s national flag, the flag of the Republic of China, is mostly a plain red color. The only distinguishing feature is the white sun against a dark blue backdrop in the top left. This top-left section is identical to the flag of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). Again, the only distinguishing feature of Taiwan’s national flag is the emblem of one of the country’s two biggest political parties. Can this flag be considered appropriate for a multiparty democracy?

Additionally, KMT supporters do not use the KMT flag when demonstrating — they always use the national flag. Brandishing the national flag, then, has become perceived more as a declaration of support for just one party instead of support for the nation as a whole. This is at odds with the most common and accepted role of a flag.

National flags should represent everyone from their country. They appear everywhere in everyday life, including at poignant events such as national celebrations and commemorations. They can be saluted in honor, waved in joy, or lain on the coffins of those fallen in the line of duty. The power of flags as a national symbol should not be underestimated.

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Learning that Taiwan's flag prominently displays the emblem of one of its political parties was a confusing and jarring experience.

How can this be acceptable? Of course, there are complex historical and political reasons why this is the case.

However, more efforts should have been made around the dawn of Taiwanese democracy to put forward a new, apolitical design to help usher in the new era of freedom. This was a missed opportunity, and forging another will be difficult, as making a change would require bipartisan consensus, and it is simply not in the KMT's interest to have its emblem removed from the national flag.

Two, the continued reverence of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石).

Chiang, a former president of the Republic of China, oversaw a brutal regime that was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people, and the incarceration of thousands more, not to mention the general social and cultural repression of the White Terror era.

Yet, his face is still on the back of New Taiwan dollar coins, there are many statues, plaques and dedications to him all over the country, and one of Taipei's most distinctive landmarks — the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall — is an imposing and grandiose shrine to him.

Upon learning a little of the history, I was surprised to see that these dedications still remain.

Of course, history is never black and white, and there are many benefits that Taiwan now enjoys that stem from Chiang's actions.

It is easy to see how and why his image has been perpetuated in this way.

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However, the passage of time should enable a more objective and reasoned analysis of historical events.

Younger Taiwanese have benefitted from some level of education on the topic in school since the mid to late 1990s, which is helping in efforts to review the long-standing cult of personality around the man.

The processes of transitional and historical justice are essential in building better relations between disparate groups by acknowledging past transgressions. The government has recently made efforts to apologize on behalf of previous regimes for the treatment of Taiwan's Aborigines, and is conducting reviews into the inherent bias in the teaching of Aboriginal history in schools.

The same approach could be applied to Chiang and the pre-democracy era KMT. It is understandable why today's KMT would be reluctant to enter into this process wholeheartedly, but ultimately, today's KMT is not the same organization as it was back then.

A more progressive and humble approach toward controversial historical events might afford the KMT some much needed trust and support among Taiwanese, particularly from younger generations.

Three, support for unification with China.

The most recent polls put the proportion of Taiwanese in favor of unification with China at 12 percent. This is a small minority, and has no doubt been reduced further by the recent events in Hong Kong and an increasingly aggressive stance from the Chinese regime.

However, as an outsider, I found it surprising that any Taiwanese would favor unification.

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Unlike those in China, the people of Taiwan benefit from a good nationwide standard of education, a free press and unfettered access to the Internet. China's transgressions toward its own people are no secret here.

It is baffling why anyone who has enjoyed the benefits of freedom of speech, a good standard of human rights and freedom of religion, would be in favor of unifying with a country in which these things are notoriously and intentionally absent.

The answer lies in Taiwan's latent Chinese nationalist ideology — the idea that both countries are part of a shared “Chinese” culture and destiny.

In reality, all one has to do to dispel this myth is look at the vast cultural and ethnic diversity across both nations.

“Chinese” people come from incredibly diverse backgrounds — a fact that the Chinese regime is trying to obfuscate through its program of cultural genocide, of which the Uighur population of East Turkestan (Xinjiang region) are currently most affected.

Another reason the desire for unification lingers on is in the nature of Taiwanese media. When media outlets owned by Chinese companies are allowed free rein in Taiwan, it is unsurprising to see their current affairs programs containing extreme bias, borderline fake news and highly selective editorial decisions.

Four, Taiwan's failure to protect itself.

Taiwan has recently passed the Anti-infiltration Act (防諜法) — a piece of legislation designed to discourage and penalize interference from foreign powers in Taiwanese affairs. When I first read that this law was being proposed, I was confused as to why it had not been passed years, or even decades ago.

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It seems like such a basic, crucial piece of legislation, which would help Taiwan protect its hard-earned democracy.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have just secured a second term in power. Why didn't it expedite the bill instead of dragging its feet?

Partisan politics aside, it is surprising that no previous government, whether DPP or KMT, have taken such basic steps to protect Taiwan's sovereignty.

China has been clear about their intentions toward Taiwan for more than a half-century, and just last year Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) infamously renewed China's refusal to rule out using military force to achieve unification.

It is unbelievable that all political parties have not united in passing comprehensive legislation to help ensure Taiwan's security after a neighboring superpower openly admitted that it might consider invading.

Taiwan also needs to understand that China can achieve much without the use of force.

The year is now 2020. The war for Taiwan is being fought across modern fronts. The battlegrounds are in the media, on the Internet, and in politicians looking out for their own interests instead of those of Taiwanese.

Legislation needs to extend beyond covering cases of clear malicious infiltration to a full review of how foreign powers can further their own agenda through Taiwan's domestic media networks.

These are just a few of the things that struck me when I started to learn about Taiwanese politics and history. As an immigrant who is considering living in Taiwan for the rest of their life, I have a vested interest in Taiwan's progress as a political entity.

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Taiwan is nothing short of a beacon for human and civil rights in Asia. It has achieved so much for such a young democracy, and much has been sacrificed throughout its history to get to this point. Taiwan is ranked as one of the “freest” democracies in Asia. It has one of the best healthcare systems in the world. It is also one of the safest countries in the world with a very low crime rate. It has fantastic infrastructure and public transport. The people are friendly and the food and culture are diverse and vibrant.

Politically, though, Taiwan’s progress is still hampered by the ideological shackles of its previous era.

In the wake of the Jan. 11 elections, it is more important than ever to look objectively and practically at Taiwan’s political blind spots and strive to review and improve policy where needed to ensure it maintains its enviable position.

China is showing no signs of tempering its aggressive approach, and Taiwan must do everything it can to differentiate itself from it and grow international support for its cause.

Taiwanese should always support government policies that preserve Taiwan’s sovereignty and democracy.

The hallmarks of freedom and democracy are that they are hard won, but easily lost. Everything Taiwan has achieved as an independent nation up until now is at stake.

Whether you are new to the country like me, or have lived here your whole life, this simple fact could not be clearer.

Andy Smith is a British writer, musician and teacher, residing in Taiwan since 2017.

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