

Taiwanese value their democracy

Written by Jerome Keating
Saturday, 07 March 2020 03:44

A poll conducted by Focus Survey Research has found that 83.2 percent of Taiwanese see themselves as strictly Taiwanese, 6.7 percent see themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese, and 5.3 percent identify as only Chinese. The remainder had no opinion or declined to respond.

These figures provide powerful insights into Taiwan's present-day democracy and the imagined community that it signifies.

In 1991, when the yearly poll was first conducted, only 13.6 percent identified as strictly Taiwanese — there has been a nearly 70 percentage point increase in less than 30 years.

What happened then, and later, to cause this change?

The term “imagined community” was coined by political scientist Benedict Anderson. It seeks to encapsulate how nations have become social constructs created for political and economic ends.

Taiwanese politics had a pivotal year in 1991, when the nation definitely took on a democratic identity.

Martial law ended in 1987 and a multiparty system was allowed. In 1992, the members of the Legislative Yuan were directly elected in the first democratic vote, followed by a presidential election in 1996.

Thus, 1991, the year that the poll was first taken, was significant. Taiwan was, at that time, on the cusp of becoming a democratic nation.

What followed can be called the “wearing off” of Taiwan's Stockholm syndrome — a condition

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where hostages develop positive feelings toward their captors during a kidnapping — which had developed while the nation was a political captive of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the KMT-controlled media.

The KMT came to Taiwan at the end of World War II at the behest of the US military government, the chief victor in the war. For many Taiwanese, it was the last of Taiwan's many colonizers.

To justify its authoritarian rule, the KMT was bent on Sinicizing the people with the message: "We are all Chinese." It kept Taiwan under martial law from 1949 to 1987, as it preached a second message: that it would "retake" the China it had been driven from.

However, with the advent of democracy, Taiwanese "captives" progressively realized that they could govern themselves and chart their own economic course.

By 1991, many of the old, die-hard KMT members began to die off and a new generation of Taiwanese — "Generation D," with the "D" standing for democracy — emerged.

Generation D — those born from 1990 on — began elementary school in 1996. They only know a multiparty nation where the leaders are chosen democratically.

The oldest of Generation D are 30 years old. With each passing year, more members of Generation D become eligible to vote. That number will continue to grow.

This is the political side of Taiwan's imagined community.

Taiwanese economics has been influenced by Generation D. It realized that a heavy reliance on the People's Republic of China (PRC) would only bring disaster. The 2014 Sunflower movement was spearheaded by these young voters.

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The movement spelled the demise of the KMT-led Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement with the PRC by demanding that all economic and trade issues be examined and vetted item by item.

Taiwan's imagined community is a work in process. It appears that identifying as Taiwanese will continue to gain momentum.

The Hong Kong protests and COVID-19 have given Taiwanese added incentive to trust in their nation and their democracy.

Last year, Taiwanese watched and supported Hong Kongers as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) botched its 20-year promise of democracy for Hong Kong by 2017, which relegated the hypocritical mantra of "one country, two systems" into the dustbin of history.

The breakout of COVID-19 from Wuhan, China, and its continued spread followed on the heels of the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests. The CCP tried to hide the virus, but after failing to contain it — even by draconian means — Beijing is searching for a scapegoat.

Taiwanese have watched all of this and they know that their democracy has done a much better job at handling the coronavirus efficiently and transparently than the one-party state across the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwanese have been able to link Anderson's concept of the imagined community with Carl Schmidt's concept of the political, where any nation must know who its friends are and who its enemies are.

For most Taiwanese, the CCP and Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) are the enemy — and the greatest threat to Taiwan's democracy.

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This reality is not lost on the CCP or Xi. For them, Taiwan's advantage is not that "We are all Chinese," but that it would offer its blue water fleet direct access to the Pacific Ocean.

This is the real reason Beijing does not forget about Taiwan, although China is avidly courting the Philippines as a Plan B.

Controlling Taiwan would allow China to have naval bases in Kaohsiung and Keelung, just as the Japanese did. Beijing could build a submarine base on the east coast.

However, Xi recognizes that his chances of winning the hearts and minds of Taiwanese are slim. A democratic Taiwan could be taken in an exorbitantly expensive war, but the PRC would pay an even greater price to hold Taiwan captive, for Taiwanese have known democracy and escaped one Stockholm syndrome.

Democracy is something that Hong Kong has tasted, but been denied. Most in China have little concept of it — little can be expected of them. Like frogs in a well, they still see their nation in light of the mantra "We are all Chinese," despite the protests of Tibetans and Uighurs.

Not finding passage to the Pacific through an alliance with Japan, Xi continues to court the Philippines with money and threats, primarily for the advantage of linking Beijing's South China Sea bases to the Pacific. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is more open to the PRC than President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

Beijing sees this. Most Taiwanese see this. Ironically, the KMT's leaders — who must fall in the 5.3 percent who identify as only Chinese — do not. They still cling to the party's outdated notion of a "1992 consensus," while younger KMT members demand reforms.

Clearly, Taiwan's democracy is playing an ever-vital role in the realpolitik of Southeast Asia. It poses no threat to others, while on the other hand, it can be a greater help in resolving global issues.

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It is time for the US and other nations to realize the importance of Taiwan, and give its democracy more respect in places such as the UN and the WHO. Otherwise, their own imagined communities will be at greater risk.

Game on anyone?

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