

A wolf stalks democratic Taiwan

Written by Bill Sharp
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History shows that the failure of democratic states typically results from a conjunction of powerful external enemies and deep domestic division. Such division in Taiwan is vulnerable to Chinese influence. Taiwan needs to keep reforming its democracy to consolidate internally and to win the support of other countries to play a significant role in the US' Indo-Pacific strategy.

Taiwan is the gleaming beam of democracy in Asia, but take a closer look: The nation is polarized — mildly, but polarized — and its democracy is fragile.

Polarization is a government's inability, especially in a young democracy, to resolve pressing problems due to the lack of a common view, low public trust, lack of institutional reform, questions of leadership and inefficiency.

It is worsened by a low threshold for conflict often erupting into large-scale street demonstrations, intolerance of different political perspectives, the zero-sum nature of Taiwanese politics and the lingering opposition to the one-party Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) state.

Simply said, the solution is better governance, but better governance in Taiwan is stymied by the nation's political culture. The country as a whole is polarized.

However, further complicating governance is the polarization within each of the major parties, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the KMT.

A clear example of polarization within the DPP was President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) difficulties in passing major reforms when a number of DPP lawmakers did not fully support her.

Polarization in the KMT can be found in the struggle between those born and raised in Taiwan (*bentupai*, 本地人) and those whose parents came from China (*waishengpai*, 外省人).

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, 藍綠). Said another way, the young who want the KMT focused more on Taiwan and reform versus older members who want a KMT more focused on China and tradition.

Taiwan's political culture is shallow, short-sighted and developed to cater to voters' favorite concerns. Democracy is not a cure-all; it requires patience and does not promise instant returns. Democracy in Taiwan has led to unreasonable expectations, creating a spoiled electorate wanting instant results or they meander to another party. As a result, there is a lack of party loyalty with only 49.6 percent of voters belonging to a political party and a significant block of swing voters.

According to research, about 20 percent of people in Taiwan do not believe in democracy and prefer the old days when everything was decided by the government.

Recently, a taxi driver unequivocally declared to me that he preferred authoritarianism. To him, democracy involved too much talking, too much back and forth, and was too messy.

The confluence of Taiwan's political polarization and political culture provides grist for Chinese propaganda and influence building.

There are many targets for such Chinese activity in Taiwan, but four institutions affect everyone's lives: the Constitution, the legislature, judicial reform and the media.

The government is based on the Republic of China Constitution of 1947. Written in China to fit Chinese circumstances in the midst of the Chinese Civil War between the KMT and Chinese Communist Party, the constitution is not Taiwan-centric.

Concern is further voiced regarding the concentration of power in the presidency. Many feel that there is a duplicity of effort and money is wasted in the maintenance of the Control Yuan and Examination Yuan.

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They say that the functions of both can be addressed by other existing components of the government.

The obvious question then is why not write a new constitution. As one well-known, highly respected Taiwanese-American academic confided to me: “That would be opening a can of worms.”

If the passage of the labor standards and pension reform bills were contentious, divisive and sparked huge rallies that often became violent, imagine what constitutional reform would do. Constitutional revision would also be concerning to the US and China. The US supports the “status quo,” while China wants to unify with Taiwan and is adamantly against independence.

If the heart of a democracy is duly elected representatives of the electorate acting on the behalf of voters in a collective body such as a legislature, then the Legislative Yuan is disappointing to many.

Owing to Taiwan’s political polarization, a contentious atmosphere often exists, sparking brawls in the legislative chamber. Criticism of the institution often focuses on too much power being concentrated in the hands of the president of the legislature and the heads of respective party caucuses.

Voting tends to reflect Taiwan’s zero-sum political inclination toward being too majoritarian with little concern for the minority. Legislative committees operate with curbed investigative powers.

Nathan Batto, of the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, says that the creation of a mid-term election would increase the responsiveness of legislators to constituent’s concerns.

Poll after poll has shown that Taiwanese have little trust in the justice system.

Attorney Jerry Cheng (程建), founder of the Taiwan Jury Association, said that people feel that

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way “because most of them do not believe decisions made by judges are fair and impartial.”

The justice system has long suffered from a lack of transparency. Many judges are appointed at an early age, raising complaints that they lack real-life and legal experience.

Judges once selected have life-long tenure. Long-serving judges appointed during the era of martial law are often dubbed “dinosaur judges,” and there is no system to assess judges’ performance or remedies for wrongful actions.

There is also a dispute over whether to employ an independent jury system, where decisions are made by juries, or a system that utilizes lay judges, who advise professional judges and then cooperatively determine the verdict and sentencing.

Premier Su Tseng-chang just sent a bill to the legislature supporting a lay judge system even though according to the Taiwan Jury Association 80 percent of the population supports an independent jury system.

“Taiwan suffers from a backlash of democracy,” former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮) told this writer in a 2015 interview.

She was specifically talking about the Taiwanese media.

Under martial law, all forms of media were strictly controlled by the government. After the lifting of martial law, Taiwan went from one extreme to another, becoming a media free-for-all.

Seeing an opportunity to use Taiwan’s new openness, China soon found ways of infiltrating the Taiwanese media.

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China has penetrated 17 Taiwanese media outlets: eight print media, four TV stations, three weekly publications, one publisher and one technical magazine. The broadcast and print media have excess capacity resulting in endless competition. There is a dearth of professionalism characterized by a lack of objectivity and direct quotes paving a path for the inclusion of rumor.

According to a poll released by the Professor Hwang Kun-kui Educational Foundation, 65.9 percent of respondents felt that there was a lack of professionalism and 96 percent felt journalists should better verify facts.

Taiwanese journalists self-censor to not offend Chinese officials who have placed highly profitable advertisements.

Taiwanese media are further characterized by a concentration of media ownership. Shockingly, even after 10 years of discussion, Taiwan has yet to come up with a law to prevent this.

A good example of concentrated media ownership can be found in the Want Want China Times Media Group, which owns CtiTV, China Television Co and the China Times.

The owner of the group is Tsai Eng-meng (蔡英萌), one of Taiwan's wealthiest men, who has large investments in China and is decidedly pro-unification, having gone on record saying: "I cannot wait for unification."

Because of his political orientation, he is dubbed the "Red Media Baron."

On May 6 last year, Brian Hioe wrote for New Bloom Magazine that the *Apple Daily* reported that from 2017 to 2018, the Want Want group received NT\$2 billion (US\$66.4 million at the current exchange rate) allegedly for advertisements and disinformation benefiting China.

In March last year, CtiTV was fined NT\$1 million by the National Communications Commission (NCC).

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During campaigns for the Jan. 11 presidential election, 50 percent of CtiTV headlines featured presidential candidate Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), who was allegedly supported financially by Tsai Eng-meng.

It is difficult to pinpoint who owns which TV stations and which have received large amounts of Chinese money to influence advertisements. Due to a number of investment schemes, such as offshore dummy companies or multiple investors who frequently sell their shares, the true source of investments is often concealed.

Many large Taiwanese companies with major investments in China are interested in acquiring a Taiwanese TV station to enhance their relationship with China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), improve their business prospects and gain advertising revenue from Chinese government advertisements.

On the surface, these advertisements promote business opportunities in China or job opportunities for younger Taiwanese, but the deeper objective is to push Taiwan toward unification.

While the NCC oversees TV stations, the Ministry of Culture oversees the print media.

Reuters on Aug. 9 reported in an article titled "Paid 'news' China using Taiwan media to win hearts and minds on island — sources" that 10 former and current employees and news managers of five media groups (to protect the identity of sources and organizations, no names were given) provided contracts signed by the TAO for articles to promote the image of China in Taiwan.

For example, the TAO paid US\$4,300 for fake stories promoting Taiwanese business in China to win the support of Taiwanese for unification.

In a similar vein, the *China Times* is called the "*People's Daily* of Taiwan," with news pieces

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and editorial content coming straight from the TAO.

Taiwan and the US share the same problem, having no regulatory mechanism or laws to govern social media. Facebook and the like are extremely popular and therefore powerful forces of influence in Taiwan. China uses social media to spread disinformation in Taiwan.

During this year's election season, a high of 3,400 attacks per day were recorded. With the advent of the coronavirus, China has used social media to create doubt and confusion among the population.

What is the solution?

First, Taiwan should establish a centralized regulatory organization with oversight over broadcast, print and social media. Second, it must also break up consolidation of media organizations. Third, it must create an enforceable media ethics code.

All of these proposed reforms should be carried out in a judicious manner that does not evoke the period of martial law.

Michael McDevitt, a retired US rear admiral and senior fellow at the Center for Naval Analysis, put it best: "Taiwan is best served by constantly improving its democracy and further winning the respect of the world."

Bill Sharp is a visiting scholar in National Taiwan University's history department. He is also president of Sharp Research and Translation LLC.

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