

Considering Chen Shui-bian's legacy: A personal assessment

Written by Stephen M. Young
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Lately I have been mulling over the checkered career of Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), former Mayor of Taipei and President of Taiwan, who subsequently spent 6+ years in jail after being convicted of corruption. I was a witness to some of this, and have studied President Chen's career over the years. While recognizing that I am treading on sensitive political ground, I will attempt here to parse out the key phases, in an attempt to make sense of this controversial political figure's career.

I first met Chen (CSB, as many of us colloquially referred to him) in 1998, when he was Mayor of Taipei, and beginning his run for the presidency. Mr. Chen was an early member of the Democratic Progressive Party, and had served as a legislator in the Legislative Yuan from 1989. He then served as Mayor of Taipei City from 1994 to 1998. Chen used this highly visible post as a springboard to run for President in 2000. In a sharply contested three-way contest, Chen edged out James Soong (宋楚瑜) and Lien Chan (連戰) to become the first non-KMT leader in the island's history.

As AIT Deputy Director, I had a standalone home on Songjiang Road (松江路), just south of Nanjing E Road (南京東路); in other words, right in the center of the city. During local and national political campaigns, sound trucks with their blaring loudspeakers seemed to crisscross our neighborhood from early in the day well into the evening. I also learned that candidates routinely displayed their picture, along with a number, on their posters. I was told this was so unlettered citizens could readily identify their candidate.

I also remember sensing early on the aura of charisma that Chen carried with him. One of my first one-on-one meetings with Ah-Bian (his Taiwanese nickname) came in the summer of 1999. Our meeting concerned President Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), who had famously spoken in an interview with a German media outlet of his "state-to-state" theory, which was seized upon by the mainland to lambast their ideological foe as separatist.

I was acting Director of AIT at the time. Washington was concerned at the possibility of

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cross-strait conflict. CSB asked to see me, and came alone to my house. The first thing he asked me was whether President Lee had cleared his remarks with us beforehand. When I told him no, he looked me in the eyes and said "I would never do anything like that!" Later Richard Bush, then Chairman of the AIT operation in Washington, flew in with stiff talking points for Lee, who drew in his horns, allowing the controversy to subside.

Less than two years later, CSB assumed the Presidency following a tightly contested three-way race. I vividly remember going to the DPP victory rally in the chilly streets of Taipei on election night, 2000, as Chen spoke to his exuberant followers. The air was electric that night, with frenzied green supporters racing up and down the streets of the capital in jubilation at ending the KMT's longstanding monopoly on executive power.

Chen's victory triggered another dip in cross-strait relations. AIT, at the direction of Washington, counseled

President-elect Chen to avoid further controversy, and following his inauguration a new sense of normalcy seemed to set in. CSB was confronted with a KMT-majority Legislature that made passing most DPP legislation difficult, if not impossible, as the former ruling party did everything in its power to thwart the Chen Administration. Despite all that, Chen eked out a second term in 2004, with a much debated assassination attempt on him in the run-up to the 2004 election probably energizing his base to get out and vote.

I returned to Taipei as AIT Director in 2007, shortly before Chen's second term ended. In an early meeting with KMT Presidential Candidate Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), he told me Chen and his wife, Wu Shu-chen (吳淑珍) were corrupt and would go to jail when he left the Presidency. Though I never delved deeply into the substance of the charges, there did seem to be more than a little political vengeance involved in the way the first non-KMT leader of Taiwan was treated.

It did not escape my colleagues and me in AIT that the KMT still held tight control of the upper reaches of the judiciary system that passed judgment on Mr. Chen. As a friend with extensive experience with South Korea quipped at the time, it doesn't look good to the outside world when a young democracy routinely sends its ex-leaders to prison. Chen was sentenced to 19 years imprisonment, but was granted parole due to illness in 2015. Chen moved south to Kaohsiung, where I understand he still resides today.

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A couple of years ago, with the assistance of Chen loyalist Mark Chen (陳其南), I was able to talk with former President Chen — then in Kaohsiung — over the phone. It was really just a courtesy call, but I felt he deserved that respect. Mark later told me CSB was moved by my gesture.

Chen Shui-bian made history by breaking the pan-Blue monopoly of power on the island. That is a legacy he can be proud of. Taiwan's democracy really came of age when Ah-Bian ended the Kuomintang's one party grip on power. His populist leadership style also changed the way Taiwan politicians campaigned and governed. Madame Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) presidency would probably have been much more difficult without Chen's prior successes. For all that, I salute this political pioneer, and wish him well as both of us become members of the septuagenarian set.

Ambassador Stephen M. Young (ret.) lived in Kaohsiung as a boy over 50 years ago, and served in AIT four times: as a young consular officer (1981-'82), as a language student (1989-'90), as Deputy Director (1998-2001) and as Director (2006-'9). He visits often and writes regularly about Taiwan matters. Young was also US Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan and Consul General to Hong Kong during his 33-year career as a foreign service officer. He has a BA from Wesleyan University and a PhD from the University of Chicago.

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