

A legislative by-election in Taichung's second electoral district and a legislative recall vote in Taipei's Zhongzheng and (中區) and Wanhua (萬華) electoral districts are to be held on Sunday. These votes are widely expected to be a test of strength between conventional forms of mobilization on the one hand and winning young people's approval on the other.

As Taiwanese democracy continues to deepen, the younger generation has become increasingly involved in politics. Young people have become more independent in how they judge the current state of the nation and how they imagine its future.

Faced with this trend, the ruling and opposition parties all need to put forward proposals that attract young people, as well as to reform and transform themselves. Each election is a test of whether they are doing so fast enough, and Sunday's by-election and recall vote will indicate the current state of play. The younger generation is about to create a new democratic momentum.

Taiwanese democracy is flourishing and the younger generation is identifying more closely with it. A poll released by the Asia-Pacific Elite Interchange Association on Dec. 13 showed that 68.9 percent of respondents agreed that Taiwan is a leading democracy.

As for former President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) assertion that Taiwan under President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration is moving away from democracy and becoming an "illiberal democracy," 66.6 percent of respondents disagreed with what Ma said.

A breakdown showed that 76.5 percent of young people aged 20 to 29 disagreed with Ma's statement, showing that the younger people are, the more likely they are to disagree with him.

Ma's remarks were geared toward traditional Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) supporters, but the things he said were far removed from the young generation, and the gap is growing wider. Although the KMT still has a certain following, the graying age structure of the party's supporters has become an obstacle to its development.

The influence on political parties of their existing structures is also reflected in the forthcoming by-election and recall vote.

The legislative by-election in Taichung's second electoral district is widely seen as an attempt by the KMT to regain a seat that it previously held in the legislature by joining hands with traditional factional forces. The KMT has put up former KMT legislator Yen Kuan-heng (顏寬恒), who is a member of the Yen family faction, as its candidate in this election.

The Yen family has repeatedly been accused by the rival camp of using controversial means, such as "black gold," to dominate the local area for several decades. Having consolidated its organization by controlling major temples, it has occupied elected representative positions at the central and local levels, and in the past even held important positions within the KMT.

Despite all this controversy, the KMT still nominated Yen and strongly supports his candidacy. In the 2020 legislative election, then-legislator Yen was ousted in Taichung's second electoral district by young people who enthusiastically returned to their hometown to vote for Taiwan Statebuilding Party candidate Chen Po-wei (陳柏偉).

Instead of looking for change, the KMT still embraces the old forces. Its successful bid to retaliate by recalling Chen in October last year shows that the family faction is trying to make a comeback.

Although Taiwan's democratic performance has been widely praised internationally, it cannot be denied that there have at the local level been frequent cases of going against the spirit of democracy and the rule of law, or using threats and inducements to gain access to party offices for political domination and personal gain.

Local factions in Taiwan first came into being because, when the KMT fled to Taiwan from China, its foreign regime lacked sufficient legitimacy to rule, so it followed a strategy of allowing local elections and cultivating various local factions so that they would compete with one another, allowing them to monopolize local interests in exchange for giving political support to the one-party state.

In the course of Taiwan's democratization, the existence of such factions has long since been a tumor in the body of democracy that needs to be cut out, but there are still political parties that continue to drink from this poisoned chalice.

Democratic politics is built on a foundation of grassroots politics, and clean politics starts at the local level. Sunday's by-election involves only one legislative seat, which will not affect the overall balance between the ruling and opposition parties in the legislature, but it is another contest as to what kind of image local politics should have. It is about whether to let the traditional factional forces keep their stranglehold on local politics, or to break their monopoly, deepen democracy and give the younger generation a political culture in which they have more room to participate.

Young people's level of commitment, be it by promoting political ideas or going home to vote, might have a fundamental impact on local politics, and this is also another health check for the political parties involved.

As for the legislative recall vote in Taipei, it is another contest between new and old ways of thinking, with young political campaigners calling for voters to reject this retaliatory recall.

The path of democratization is never a smooth and easy one. In Taiwan, aside from facing continual backlashes by the old forces on the home front, there is also the external threat of annexation by China. As the Chinese Communist Party tries to infiltrate Taiwanese society, some of those old forces are willing to act as its accomplices, posing a new threat to Taiwanese democracy.

With threats from China looming, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy on Wednesday released its annual survey on Taiwanese View of Democratic Values and Governance.

When people were asked whether they would be willing to defend Taiwan if China attacks it for declaring independence, or if Beijing uses military force to achieve its goal of unification, in both cases, more than 60 percent of respondents said they would be willing to stand up and fight for Taiwan.

Youth standing up for democracy

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A breakdown of the survey showed that young, middle-aged and elderly age groups showed that young people are more willing to fight for the nation. As well as being “naturally pro-independence,” in order to defend democracy, the young generation must be more mentally prepared to get involved.

Seeing how Beijing has sought to extinguish the voice of democracy in Hong Kong by suppressing young people who are fighting for freedom has made Taiwanese youth more deeply aware of the need to stand up and safeguard their homeland, because Taiwan is China’s next target for destruction.

Legislative Speaker You Si-kun (游錫堃) on Sept. 10 last year said that it would be good for Taiwan to have more parties that can take turns in government. He said he hoped that the opposition parties would all become loyal opposition parties, and that they would soon be strong enough to bring about handovers of government power so that Taiwan’s party politics can be normalized.

These words show that You views the competition between government and opposition parties from a democratic perspective. Parties’ loyalty to the country means that they work together to defend the democratic system of government and stand together in resisting external threats, rather than flirting and secretly communicating with those who wish to annex Taiwan.

Likewise, for political parties to thrive, they must win the approval and participation of more young people.

With the beginning of a new year, more young people will want to make their voices heard. They will inject renewed vigor into the nation’s democracy and continue to examine the paths taken by the ruling and opposition parties.

Parties that do not stand with mainstream opinion in Taiwan, but are only interested in linking up with China and showing their loyalty to Beijing, will eventually be eliminated from history, because they are far removed from the young generation.

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