

A fundamental shift in local politics

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Sunday's by-election in Taichung's second electoral district was another loss for the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). It was also an example of an unforced strategic error, initiated by former KMT chairman Johnny Chiang (蔣經國) and continued by the current chairman, Eric Chu (朱立倫).

The hapless Chu gifted the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) — which already has a legislative majority — another seat in the legislature and caused a potential headache for Taichung Mayor Lu Shioh-yen (盧秀燕) of the KMT.

The question is not why the KMT's candidate, Yen Kuan-heng (顏寬恒), lost; it is why the party thought he could win.

In conventional political wisdom, Yen and his family are deeply problematic, and have been involved in many scandals. New ones, related to their real-estate holdings, came to light during the by-election campaign.

For decades, the Yen family — through its connections and control over vote captains, loyalty networks and information flows — has had considerable sway in Taichung, and could always be relied on to leverage its influence in the locality.

In 2002, Yen's father, former Non-Partisan Solidarity Union legislator Yen Ching-piao (顏清彪), was elected as a legislator for then-Taichung County, despite having run his campaign from behind bars, detained on corruption, attempted murder and firearms charges. Yet Yen Kuan-heng was defeated by former Taiwan Statebuilding Party legislator Chen Po-wei (陳博偉) in 2020.

The short answer to why the KMT thought Yen Kuan-heng was still a shoe-in is that the party has both feet stuck in the past: not only is it unable to keep pace with the times, it seems to be unaware that things have moved on.

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Things are changing in the way that voters access and process information, with technological advances and the advent of social media.

Politicians nowadays need to be more aware about how information is disseminated and consumed. The Yen family's control over the narrative and voters' knowledge of issues has slipped, and the local electorate had become disillusioned with established politicians and traditional ways.

Another aspect is the increased mobility of the voter base within a given locality; the local population is increasingly in flux, and while politicians with local influence still hold sway over the local electorate, this is less the case than it has been in previous decades.

The KMT's error was failing to keep up with the times and relying on the old way of doing things.

Both the DPP and the KMT have been caught off guard; in Sunday's election, it was the former's fortune that it had had its fingers burned before, and had learned from the experience of losing the Kaohsiung mayorship to Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) in 2018 because of his superior public relations team.

It is symptomatic of the KMT's inability to learn that it did not realize the causes behind Han's victory. It was so ecstatic to have won in a pan-green camp stronghold and was happy to just ride the "Han wave," all the way to the heights of the Presidential Office if that was where Han took it, and failed to analyze exactly what had changed on the ground.

Han had represented a new breed of politicians, not tied to the old way of doing things, and had promised to work hard for the local electorate. Voters responded not just to his populist approach, but also to his potential; not his established network, but his promise of something different.

Taichung voters on Sunday did not feel that Yen Kuan-heng represented any of this.

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As the recalls of Han and Chen demonstrated, trust needs to be earned and maintained.

This is DPP legislator-elect Lin Ching-yi's (林錫山) task going forward.

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