

The KMT cannot accept democracy

Written by Jerome Keating

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The start of any new year is always a good time for introspection, reflection and resolutions.

This advice is appropriate for all. In Taiwan, it should clearly be heeded by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which continues to have its share of troubles.

The KMT has had so many difficulties in the past decade that it almost seems to revel in them with the celebration of each new year.

What then could be done? The KMT can begin by examining the present and slowly tracing backward to see how the dots are connected.

Whether the party admits it or not, it continues to wither on the vines of public opinion and democracy.

In the past year, it has slipped in opinion polls from the second main political party in Taiwan to third, replaced by Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je's (柯文哲) Taiwan People's Party. That in itself should stand as a clear warning for a party that once controlled the nation as a one-party state.

There is more.

Other signs indicate how the KMT still remains out of touch with Taiwan's public. Last month, the KMT brought before the voters four referendum questions, each designed to challenge the leadership of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

With these questions, the KMT hoped to embarrass, if not discredit, the ruling party. It was not to be. The proposals failed and ended with a resounding DPP victory.

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However, the KMT was not done. This month, it again hoped to make inroads by utilizing its form of “revenge recall,” as the party was still smarting from the recall of former Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), who happened to be the KMT presidential candidate in the 2020 election.

This madness began with trying to unseat independent Kaohsiung City Councilor Huang Jie (黃捷), which failed.

The KMT then briefly gained seeming success by unseating former Taiwan Statebuilding Party legislator Chen Po-wei (陳柏偉) in Taichung.

This success was again misread, and the party tried to unseat independent Legislator Freddie Lim (林錫山).

Recall votes unfortunately seem to have become the rule of the day after the overwhelming recall of Han.

However, the KMT has never faced up to the reality of why Han was recalled. He had barely been elected mayor of Kaohsiung in November 2018 when he began running for the presidency in 2019. The KMT missed the point of why those voting to recall Han later far outnumbered those who had elected him. Many had switched sides in their choice. Why?

The misreading of Han’s election was obvious. The KMT had been so delighted to win back the mayor’s seat in Kaohsiung that it sensed a false tide. It failed to see that a candidate should make an effort to do the job they were elected for before running for a higher office.

However, it ignored this principle and surged forward.

With bitter grapes, the KMT has lapsed into the present recall madness. It felt that if it suffered, all must suffer.

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This led to the fall of Chen in Taichung, followed by the attempt to unseat Lim. The latter failed by not reaching the small threshold of one-quarter of the eligible voters. Few voters were interested in the madness.

Lim kept his seat, but that was not all. In the by-election for Chen's seat in Taichung, Yen Kuan-heng (顏寬恒), the KMT's candidate from the powerful Yen clan, was soundly defeated by the DPP's candidate, Lin Ching-yi (林錫山), and with a large turnout.

That is the status of the KMT as it flounders. These failures should be cause for some introspection, but that is not happening. With the KMT, one has the feeling that it has not figured out the answer to the question: "Why don't the people like us?"

For that answer, the KMT must look back farther into the past as to why the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement failed, why the Sunflower movement was successful and why the KMT lost the presidency in 2016. These dots are connected.

Inquiry should not stop there. The KMT needs to examine the role democracy plays within the party and for China. That goes back to its roots in 1911. Face it or not, democracy has never been the predominant narrative that the KMT held on to amid all competing paradigms. The desire to rule a "Chinese empire" has always superseded any thought of democracy for all.

Democracy has always had a part in Taiwan's evolving fabric and identity as it moved from the Japanese colonial era, past the KMT's one-party state occupation and toward democracy.

Can the KMT painfully and honestly face that it has always had troubles with democracy?

For example, in dealing with its mantra of the fake "1992 consensus," the KMT always sacrifices democracy when it runs against holding to the idea of a "one China" empire.

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To deal with this, the KMT would have had to admit that it was a government in exile — a diaspora dragging with it its failed Constitution for “one China.”

One never finds the KMT being critical of what is going on in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and so on. Such criticism goes against the fabric of “one China.”

In its more than 100 years, the the party has never had democracy as its main thread. The KMT’s leaders see democracy only as a means of deposing the opposition, but not as a right in itself.

It has been said that you cannot support democracy only when it means that you win. However, that has been the guiding principle of the KMT: It accepts democracy only if it means that it will win, and then only if it leads to “one China.”

This thought runs much deeper than most imagine. In the Chinese — not the Taiwanese — mindset, it is the ultimate paradigm. Han chauvinism must dominate. The Ming Dynasty was more about getting rid of the Mongols than finding a better rule. The same holds true about the Qing; Sun Yat-sen’s (孫逸仙) revolution was more to get rid of Manchu rule than to support democracy.

Throughout the Chinese Civil War, why did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) succeed against the better equipped KMT?

Both were fighting for leadership, but neither was fighting for a democratic China; they both favored a Chinese empire with each as its leader.

The KMT has never lived up to its idealistic goals. The CCP has never professed democracy, so despite its many disasters, it is not as guilty of false promises.

Taiwan is on the other side of this fault line. It knew long before the Xinhai Revolution that it

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has a different identity born by its own experience and dreams, not ethnicity.

The world has entered a new phase of paradigm wars. The future world struggle is likely to be between democratic states and one-party autocracies. This is where the fault line will be between the KMT and Taiwanese.

To understand this, one must see that Taiwanese do not identify with what happened in 1911; Taiwanese see their revolution as between 1979 and the lifting of martial law in 1987. This history is so deep that the old KMT could never understand it, and one doubts if even the new KMT can grasp it.

Few outside of Taiwan might grasp it as well, but it defines the difference between Taiwan, China and the future — and why for Taiwan to succeed, the KMT must fail.

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