

Rationalism vs. Nationalism

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Watching elections in Taiwan often feels like viewing a horse race. Most talk is about which horse is in the lead, which horse is lagging behind, which horse has just joined the race or withdrawn. However, the upcoming presidential election in Taiwan is not a horse race, not a showdown between the so-called Blue and Green Camps, but, rather, a head-on collision between two intangible Isms.

On the one side is the challenger Rationalism; on the other the incumbent Nationalism. The enormity of what is at stake is also unprecedented, because it involves not merely which horse crosses the finish line first, or whether there will be a change of governing political party, but rather the very survival of Taiwan.

Taiwan Nationalism sprouted as early as the Lee Teng-hui presidency, but its advocates always minced their words, couching their position in vagaries. After President Tsai took office, it became more explicit; while former Premier William Lai, who is currently challenging her in the Democratic Progressive Party primary election, has stated it even more clearly and blatantly. It is estimated that the more intense the election campaign, the less Nationalism will remain under wraps.

At its core, Taiwan Nationalism has both emotional and rational dimensions. At the emotional level, it insists that "Taiwanese are not Chinese" and "not part of the Chinese nation." The dismissive psychology of most in the DPP is deeply ingrained. President Tsai also seems to have never acknowledged this bloodline connection. Naturally, when Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je, whose political pedigree is deep green, violated this major taboo by uttering the phrase "both sides of the Strait belong to the same family," the entire party stood up denouncing him.

At the rational level, Nationalism requires that Taiwan must be totally separate from China. Not only is it necessary to reject any form of modus vivendi with Beijing, such as the "1992 Consensus," "one-China, with different interpretations," or Beijing's "one China," "one country, two systems," it is also imperative to revive the "no contact, no talks, no compromise" policy of the Cold War era. Likewise the cross-strait economic, social and cultural ties must be proactively loosened and diplomatic and military confrontation intensified. Their rhetoric completely overlooks the "opportunity" component of the Mainland, only highlighting its "threat," in order to consolidate anti-China sentiment within Taiwan.

In order to avoid the kind of international backlash sparked by former President Chen Shui-bian's rashness in the past, the Tsai administration speaks of "maintaining the status quo" and "reform," but, in reality, has been transforming the power and policy of Taiwan, much like a chick undergoing incubation beneath the cover of a thin eggshell. When the time is ripe, it will peck its way through the shell and present itself as a new "Nation" and new "State."

The embryo of this Nationalism gestated in the so-called "two-state theory" masterminded by Dr. Tsai back in 1999 when she served as a senior advisor to Lee Teng-hui. After 20 years of flourishing growth, it had the good fortune of running into Washington's decision to recast the US-China relationship from one of "engagement" to that of "competition" (which is not equivalent to "confrontation"). Thus, the Tsai Administration thinks it can rely on firm US support and is bursting with confidence. However, not so luckily, it also just happened to coincide with China's dramatic rise in power, so much so that even the U.S., upon which Tsai leans for support, is deeply worried about whether it is up to the task of carrying Taiwan on its shoulders.

If Taiwan Nationalism scores another electoral victory in January 2020 which is akin to a "referendum on Taiwan Independence," Beijing's Taiwan policy will be left in tatters, and Xi Jinping will face unprecedented pressure in mainland China. Looking back at the spring of 2008 when Ma Ying-jeou was almost assured of his electoral victory and China's military strength in the Taiwan Strait remained behind that of the U.S., Beijing still mobilized in preparation for military action against Taiwan lest the DPP managed somehow to retain the presidency.

Nowadays, the two great powers have practically reached parity in the Strait. Some US think tanks even warn that the balance of power has already tilted toward Beijing. Would Beijing be willing to bite the bullet and coexist peacefully with Taiwan Nationalism for four more years during which period the Chinese Communist Party will mark its centennial in 2021 and the start of Xi Jinping's new term of office in 2022? It appears most likely that a biting continental cold front, including military threats, would barrel full tilt toward Taiwan at some point in time, and the US-China relationship will thus be reaching the point of showdown.

If Washington is willing to pay a huge price for Taiwan at this time, the two great powers will cross swords, and Taiwan will no doubt bear the brunt and suffer severe, if not mortal, harm. If the U.S. calculates that it may not prevail and ends up offering only moral support, or if it does commit forces but is unable to arrive in time or stand guard over Taiwan long enough, then the Mainland can certainly accomplish its grand task of reunification. If both Washington and Beijing are unwilling to take on each

other militarily, they will seek to resolve the issue through negotiations, leaving Taiwan a passive morsel of meat awaiting its fate on the cutting board. Under any of these "ifs", Taiwan will plunge into its worst catastrophe in decades.

Fortunately, those in Taiwan unwilling to be dragged by Nationalism into this desperate situation have another option, namely Rationalism. This Rationalism grows from the failure of the headstrong Tsai administration to safeguard the real economic and security needs of the Taiwan people. The nine-in-one local election last November showed that mainstream public opinion in Taiwan has already shifted from Nationalism to Rationalism, beyond the cleavages of the blue vs. green, partisan, provincial heritage, geographical, and generational divisions of the past, and is driven completely by reason and pragmatism. The mayor of Kaohsiung Han Kuo-yu is riding exactly this wave to sweep across all of Taiwan.

However, Nationalism remains a powerful force in Taiwan with strong gut-level appeal. And Rationalism, the mainstream for the time being, remains inchoate, abstract and passive. In order to implement Rationalism, in addition to choosing a strong presidential candidate soon enough, a set of pragmatic policy guidelines must be devised to cope with the myriad of difficult problems facing Taiwan today. These guidelines should not address economic issues alone, as in the last local elections. They must also assure the Taiwan public of greater sense of security in the present-day precarious US-China-Taiwan situation.

This is no simple task, yet, it is doable. If Taiwan is to continue being a land of "small, solid happiness," it is probably the only way.

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