

RESEARCH NOTE

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen Resigns as Party Leader After Stinging Defeat in Local Elections

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Executive Summary

Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) saw major defeats in local races on November 26, with President Tsai Ing-wen resigning as DPP leader

China-skepticism approaching consensus among public, and no longer enough to swing elections alone

Opposition party Kuomintang (KMT) remains competitive ahead of the 2024 presidential ballot

Background and Context

Taiwan's latest local elections, held in November 2022, came during President Tsai Ing-wen's second term. Known as the "nine-in-one," they included 22 mayoral races in major cities, and have conventionally focused on both regional policies and candidates' personal charisma. They differ from presidential elections, which have historically revolved around international affairs, especially cross-strait relations. However, this year, Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) ran on a pledge to protect the country's democracy — illustrated by its campaign slogan, "opposing China and defending Taiwan." On the November 26 election day, Tsai declared at a campaign gala that "Taiwan has not caved into President Xi Jinping's 'one country, two systems' proposal," and that "the existence of Taiwan and insistence of the Taiwanese people on freedom and democracy is a not a provocation to anyone." During the campaign, Tsai said her mission was to do everything possible "to make Taiwan remain Taiwan for the Taiwanese."¹

This message did not resonate with voters. The DPP ultimately won just five out of the 22 elections across Taiwan, a record low for the party. Among other issues, the public also spurned the DPP's proposal to lower the voting age. Tsai subsequently resigned as head of the DPP, remarking that "we have not broken through the existing local electoral structure and have failed to meet the

expectations of the people.”² Tsai will serve as president for two more years until the 2024 national race, a role unaffected by her resignation. In Taipei, where the party’s candidate employed a conservative campaign strategy and reiterated an anti-China message, the DPP suffered its worst-ever defeat.³

In contrast, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) party won 13 out of the 22 races, including a number of major cities. Notably, KMT regained the key mayoralty of Taipei, which it had held from 1998-2014. The KMT’s Chiang Wan-an, a charismatic 43-year-old, will become the youngest-ever mayor of Taipei. The Kuomintang won 44.82 percent of ballots in the capital, indicating that it captured voters beyond its usual base. Public support for Chiang’s DPP opponent, Chen Shih-chung, had gradually waned after his effective handling of Covid-19 early in the pandemic, and the result shows that the DPP has lost some key voters.

Key Issues

CONSENSUS AND CHANGE

The DPP defeat does not mean that China-skepticism has lost its salience in Taiwanese politics. Rather, it may suggest that such a view has become a virtual consensus among Taiwan’s three major parties and can no longer differentiate candidates’ electoral positioning.⁴ For instance, Kuomintang president Eric Chu had similarly said during a campaign on Saturday that its mission is “to defend freedom and democracy in Taiwan.” In the local races, voters turned their attention to governance issues. The results reflected broad dissatisfaction with the DPP’s Covid-19 policy and Taiwan’s weak economic performance in recent years.

Tsai Ing-wen was first elected in 2016 and was re-elected in 2020 on a strongly an-

ti-China platform. That victory was aided by a public rebuke of Beijing, whose effective breach of its self-declared “one country, two systems” policy, with the suppression of the Hong Kong democracy movement, sparked imminent fears for Taiwan’s future. Surveys have also indicated a steady transformation of Taiwanese identity over the past three decades, with fewer people considering themselves “both Chinese and Taiwanese” and more as exclusively Taiwanese. In July of this year, 63.7 percent of the public identified as Taiwanese, up from 54.5 percent in 2016, when Tsai was first elected.⁵ Both Taiwanese identity and concerns over Taiwanese democracy have been widely accepted by the public, and were not the reasons for voters’ rejection of the DPP.

What’s Next?

Taiwan’s political future will shape relations between Beijing and Washington, and could affect the stability of the Indo-Pacific region at large.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has appeared determined to reunite with the island, hinting that Taiwan is not only a question of China’s national interest but also central to his personal legacy. Since coming to power, Xi has stated that Beijing “will never promise to renounce the use of force,” and incorporated opposition to Taiwanese independence into the Chinese Communist Party’s constitution. Most recently, Beijing-Taipei tensions flared when China conducted military drills around Taiwan in response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s trip to the island (see our August 9 research note, “Pelosi Visits Taiwan and China Responds”). Against this backdrop, the PRC’s Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson claimed the recent election demonstrated the Taiwanese public’s preference for “peace, stability, and

a good life.” The official insisted that Beijing will work towards the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and reiterated its opposition to Taiwanese independence and foreign involvement.

The local election results, like those of a U.S. midterm election, will not themselves determine Taiwan’s future or the 2024 presidential ballot. However, the outcome indicates that the KMT continues to enjoy broad electoral appeal while the DPP can no longer count on overwhelming popularity based simply on anti-China messaging. The results will prompt a rethink within both parties, as each seeks to balance among different factions and nominate the strongest possible presidential candidate. For the DPP, it is in fact Tsai’s second time stepping down as party leader, given that resigning after facing a major defeat is a norm of Taiwanese

politics. The key question is who will emerge to fill core DPP positions, such as those in the Legislative Yuan, in the upcoming months.

The possibility of the KMT returning to power also raises the prospect of a more pro-China Taiwan. The KMT has traditionally represented business interests and compared with the incumbent DPP has been seen as less hostile towards Beijing. Past Kuomintang administrations saw the two governments lift travel restrictions, facilitate trade, and speak on friendlier terms. Notably, the KMT’s promising Taipei mayor-elect, Chiang Wan-an, has so far denied an interest in running for the top job in two years. He has also not taken clear positions on central cross-Strait issues. Observers will closely watch updates from the two parties leading up to 2024, a critical year for the island’s future.

1 <https://www.voacantonese.com/a/taiwan-belongs-to-taiwanese-president-says-in-fiery-preelection-rebuff-to-china-20221112/6832235.html>

2 <https://www.voachinese.com/a/taiwan-s-opposition-kmt-set-for-big-win-in-local-elections-20221126/6851182.html>

3 TVBS News streaming, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRljzK2_rw

4 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/was-china-winner-taiwan-s-elections-205968>

5 <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/upload/44/doc/6960/People202206.jpg>

6 <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/302155>