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Discussion Paper

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Current Situation and Future Prospects of Taiwan Politics

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When observing the future prospects of Taiwan politics, we must take several transformational factors into consideration, including economic strength, social conditions as well as people's psychology. During the past ten years, widespread complaints among Taiwan people have been typically made on personal income. They did not see any rise in wages in ten to twenty years, and most new university graduates generally make 22,000 NT\$ a year. Just across the Strait, income level of mainland Chinese has witnessed a swift growth in the same time period. 20 years ago, income of a Taiwan professor might be at least 50 times as much as that of a mainland one, and the benchmark pay point of new university graduates in Taiwan might be at least 20 times as much as that of their mainland counterparts. But nowadays, the real income of Taiwan professors and new employers is roughly twice as much as that of their counterparts in east coastal mainland. If taking into account the real purchasing power and other relevant factors, we could see only a very small disparity. More and more people in Taiwan are seeking employments on the mainland. The fear of mainland workers' flooding labor market in Taiwan has been replaced by Taiwan workers' readiness of marching into Chinese mainland. Against this background, a lot of experts and scholars in Taiwan frequently express their anxiety that Taiwan is on the way to Philippinization. On July 6th, Prof. Wang Jianquan, Vice President of Chung-Hua Institution for Economic Research (CIER), who came to Xiamen University to attend a symposium, stated some words describing Taiwan situation as follows: "KMT and DPP who are in confrontation strive to strengthen their own defenses and clear the battlefields; blood-thirsty media make use of every chance to produce news; coward officials hesitate to advance or retreat; prevalent populism leaves a thousand things undone." Based on his words, I intend to do some analysis and then give my points of view on the current situation as well as future prospects of Taiwan politics.

I. Distorted Political Culture

The political culture of Taiwan is on the whole filled with Chinese characteristics and inherited from the deep-rooted traditions of political culture in the mainland. Chinese across the Strait share similar behavior model, discourse system and structure in politics. On certain levels of traditional Chinese political culture, the Chinese characteristics are reserved purer and more homogeneous in Taiwan than in the mainland.

The greatest difference between political cultures across the Strait is regarding the design and function of rules of the political system, which was under direct influence of European political thinking at the turn of 19th century to the 20th and led to a dispute between political systems of capitalism and socialism. It turned out that Capitalism and socialism are not necessarily incompatible with each other, and they could interact in many ways. The Taiwan issue is the political legacy of the Chinese civil war. Restrained by the Cold War structure, neither KMT nor CCP could find any opportunity to launch bilateral dialogues in order to reconcile their differences on political lines. The long separation on account of political dispute across the Strait intensified the border between the subsystems of political culture on the either side, giving cross-strait differences of political culture a prominent status. Some so called issues such as “Spanish culture” or “Japanese colonial culture” exerted an influence and were amplified on purpose.

As a matter of fact, the existing cross-strait difference on political culture could be fundamentally seen as one of many products of distorted political culture in Taiwan. In spite of falling back to the coastal islands in Southeast China, the KMT has been claiming itself to be the “Chinese central government” during its first 40 years in power. The KMT people monopolized various political resources in Taiwan under the excuse of unfinished national mobilization in suppression of communist rebellion and restoration of the Republic, repressing the native consciousness of Taiwan with “Great Chinese consciousness”, which has resulted in the opposition of “Chinese consciousness” and “Taiwanese consciousness”. Soon after the DPP was founded, power struggles between two political forces evolved to conflicts between two camps with one “loving China” and the other “loving Taiwan”. The cross-strait relation was unfortunately hit by “stray bullet of politics”, and party struggle was misled to controversy over national identity. People who are “Identified with China” were very likely to be pinned with the political label of “Pro-communist” or going over to the communist. The so-called dispute on “national identity” has distorted the party struggles and left a split in Taiwan society. Consequently, the cognition, feeling and value orientation of Taiwan people toward politics have all been heterogenized.

II. Worsened Party Politics

The mainstream political value system of the modern western world has played a vital role in the development of Taiwan politics from the relatively stable rule under Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo’s authority to American democratic politics during the Li Teng-hui era. A number of scholars from European countries or the US as well as political elites in Taiwan had expected that American democratic politics could lay a solid foundation for Taiwan’s political transformation and bring legitimacy for the new political system. However,

practice has shown that the above expectation is no more than wishful thinking, and the real situation is much more complicated. With a distorted political culture, Taiwan's party politics failed to function on a base of homogeneous and stable national identity, and fell into a vicious cycle of putting party or individual interest as the first priority for lack of public awareness as well as a common political totem among different parties and even among leaders from the same political party. Politicians in Taiwan have got accustomed to oppose for the sake of opposing when facing political issues. They disregard the facts, confounding right and wrong, and act completely unconcerned about overall, long-term interests of Taiwan and its people.

Just take cross-strait relations as an example: The DPP fights to the death against ECFA and the recent cross-strait service trade agreement in spite of the fact that both agreements could do more good than harm to Taiwan. Quite a few entrepreneurs in Taiwan have felt desperate about the party politics. Complaints such as "you will not know the Cultural Revolution is still underway until you come to Taiwan" or "Taiwan is on the verge of Philippinization" are circulating in Taiwan's press circles.

Another reason for the difficulty of reaching a compromise of interests among various parties and politicians is the interference of "unification and independence dispute"----a fake problem. Once the Chinese mainland factor is involved, the malignant party politics in Taiwan characterized by "opposition only for the sake of opposing" will entangle itself in much fiercer power struggles.

III. Fading Influence of Political Authority

Now in political circles of Taiwan we could sense a populist atmosphere everywhere. Various kinds of public opinions are raised to fever pitch and people have exclusive concern with their ballot ticket. Most politicians in Taiwan are anxious to please voters, and therefore lack basic principles and stances, regardless of the rights and wrongs. Their failure in taking over political responsibilities causes government bureaus incapable of making sound decisions or implementing with high efficiency.

As the top leader of Taiwan, Mr. Ma Ying-jeou has excellent political morality as well as broad political ambitions which are regrettably disconnected from the social reality of Taiwan. Facing the disintegrated interest structure, a great number of KMT politicians have been alienated from Mr. Ma, and some of them hold him back. Another problem hindering Mr. Ma is that he finds it difficult to mobilize those KMT representatives in the "Legislative Yuan", although the KMT has the majority of seats in it. With insufficient authority from the top leader, these government officials can hardly enhance their administrative ability when carrying out political decisions.

Within the institutional framework of party and parliament politics, the “Executive Yuan” in Taiwan is blamed for whatever it does. Checked by the “Legislative Yuan”, neither the president of the “Executive Yuan” nor his subordinate ministers could achieve anything. Therefore, the legislative process of major policies in Taiwan is seriously delayed and those government bureaus can wield little power when making and carrying out policies. As heads of the “Five Capitals” and other counties or cities are all elected by people, the declining authority of the “central government” is hastened with the impact of individualism and populist politics.

Moreover, the DPP who is now in opposition could neither exercise authority over different faction leaders by its central committee. Hitherto, there is no such a DPP chairman who could steer reforms on significant issues of politics, which makes it difficult for the party to get rid of the political dilemma of being one advocating Taiwan’s independence.

Without authority from the government and party politics, Taiwan appears to be a ship out of driving power as well as captain, lost at sea. As a matter of fact, neither Mr. Ma Ying-jeou nor anybody else can find much chance to alter the current situation. Fortunately, Taiwan has an energetic civil society with solid tradition of Chinese culture. Political chaos thus has very few negative effects on Taiwan’s social order.

IV. A Marginalized Role in Politics

During the Cold War years, Taiwan was once regarded as a key actor both in the political and the military sense. While after the reform and opening up of mainland China, Taiwan gradually lost its economic advantages and the special political and military status of the old days.

Nowadays, Mainland China has established positive relations of mutual integration with the US and other major powers, and become a constructive force in the international community. Compared with the mainland, Taiwan has a long way to go in enhancing its comprehensive strength. But when will the “Chronic Cultural Revolution” come to end on the island?

As long as Taiwan cannot get herself out of trouble, she has no choice but play a marginalized role in politics as time goes by. In the end, it is Taiwan herself, not the mainland, that leads her in the direction of turning into a “local authority”.