

“Future Prospects and Challenges of Taiwan's Democracy”

Keynote Address

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by

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It is a great honor for me to speak to you today. To be perfectly frank, I don't have any idea what I am doing talking to Taiwan's assembled political scientists. I am a political scientist by training, but I confess that I gave up my membership in the American Political Science Association a long time ago. I have the deepest respect for work that all of you have done to understand this island's political system, how it has evolved and how it works or doesn't work. In my own research and writing, I have borrowed extensively from the findings of many of you. So there is some question whether there is anything new I can tell you this morning. My only excuse is that Professor Liao asked me to give your keynote address and I usually do what she asks.

Personal Indulgence

Dr. Liao asked me to speak about the Future Prospects and Challenges of Taiwan's Democracy. Of course, Taiwan's democracy is a subject which has been an important dimension of much of my career. With your indulgence, let me give you just three examples. While I was working for the Asia Society, over twenty years ago, I edited an essay that Tien Hung-mao wrote for the Society in which he suggested that when moderates in the Kuomintang and *dangwai* were strong and coordinated their actions political progress occurred, but that retrogression took place when more radical forces in the ruling and opposition two camps were in the ascendant. I don't know if Dr. Tien would agree, but I would suggest that these four streams have continued in a new form today, that we call them Dark Green, Light Green, Light Blue, and Dark Blue, but that that his insight still applies – that centrist, reformist coalitions produce progress.

My first major task after joining Congressman Steve Solarz's staff was to draft a speech on “Democracy and the Future of Taiwan,” which he gave a speech to a *dangwai* audience at the Ambassador Hotel in August 1983. Solarz's main theme was that Taiwan, having achieved an economic miracle, was ready for a political miracle. In retrospect his most telling argument was the potential international impact of democratization: that other countries, particularly the United States, would be more likely to support a Taiwan that was democratic. That was a bargain that Chiang Ching-kuo decided to take, and the results were very positive. The people of Taiwan, who for their entire history had been denied a say over their destiny, finally got a say. Previously, the United States had made some choices for Taiwan without regard to the wishes of the populace, Americans like Congressman Solarz played a part in helping them finally get the voice that they never had and so compensate for previous American actions. Now whether the bargain that Congressman Solarz offered still holds – that the United States will support Taiwan simply because it is a democracy -- is a question to which I will return.

I take some credit for introducing into American policy rhetoric a connection between Taiwan's democratization and cross-Strait relations. This occurred in the middle of 1998. President Clinton had made his trip to China and, aside from stating the three nos, he also proclaimed the value of freedom and democracy for China. President Lee Teng-hui was unhappy that Clinton had not mentioned the only ethnic Chinese society where democracy existed, Taiwan. I thought the United States should respond to him, as well as to those in the United States who at this time were complaining that democracy in Taiwan was destabilizing. So when it came time to draft my next public speech as AIT Chairman, I included a final paragraph that made several points: Taiwan's democracy was a force for stability; Taiwan was a model for the PRC; the island's people were wise and prudent, not reckless; and the results of cross-Strait dialogue must meet with the Taiwan public's approval. I sent the draft to the State Department to approval, uncertain what would happen to that last paragraph. To my delight, it was approved with virtually no change. Having been authorized to say, in effect, that the people of Taiwan had gained a seat at the negotiating table, I kept saying it. And I was gratified in February 2000 when President Clinton picked up the concept and asserted that the Taiwan Strait issue had to be resolved not only peacefully but also with the assent of the people of Taiwan. Why, by the way, the Bush Administration is now saying that it has to be resolved with the assent of the people of on both sides of the Taiwan Strait puzzles me.

Democracies Distort

But to stress the views of the people of Taiwan as a key point of reference for cross-Strait relations or anything else only raises a prior question, doesn't it? That prior question is as follows: how does Taiwan's democratic political system does determine and derive those views in the first place? We start with the truism that no democratic system reflects precisely the popular will. All democracies to some extent distort the the people's wishes (not as badly as authoritarian or totalitarian systems to be sure, but they still distort). I suspect that one of the reasons many people during 2003 liked President's Chen's proposal for expanding the use of the referendum was a frustration with the stalemate in the Legislative Yuan in carrying out the public's business. This mechanism of direct democracy, in their view, would cope with the distortions of indirect democracy. These people may have ignored the possibility that referenda might be subject to their own distortions (by the mass media perhaps?), but we can acknowledge that their concern was genuine.

Because the issues that the people of Taiwan may face are so significant, this problem of distortion is not a trivial one. How to cope with China is the biggest of those issues, an issue that affects the current well-being and the permanent future of twenty-three million people. If the political system gets this issue wrong and distort the popular will, it could have profound moral consequences. And the word "wrong" take several different forms.

Many of you will recall that that back in the early 1990s, there was a concern, expressed by the DPP, that the KMT leadership might work out a deal with China and then ratify it through a government that, the DPP claimed, was still unrepresentative of the population. That would be one kind of distortion. As I was writing *Untying the Knot*, another kind occurred to me. That is, suppose Beijing offers Taiwan a pretty good deal, one that polls showed that a super-majority is prepared to accept, but because the political system still gives power to small minorities, the interests of the majority are overridden.

I apologize for this rather theoretical digression on how democratic systems distort the popular will. Let come at my subject from a more concrete direction and point out a

paradox in the American discourse about Taiwan's political system, a paradox that I suspect has puzzled you. On the one hand, there is still praise for the island's democratization as a model of American values. The most recent example of this is President Bush's speech last month in Kyoto. As he said, "By embracing freedom at all levels, Taiwan has delivered prosperity to its people and created a free and democratic Chinese society." On the other hand, the operation of Taiwan's democratic system sometimes provokes opposition from the U.S. government and American China specialists (to say nothing of the government on mainland China). The most obvious example of that opposition was that same President Bush's criticism of President Chen Shui-bian in December 2003 for proposing a new constitution to be approved by a referendum. At that time, people on Taiwan understandably asked, why shouldn't a democratic system reform itself and seek the public's approval of the result? Is that not what good democracies do?

How do we explain this paradox between praise for the system in general and blame for its specific operation? Part of it stems from the fact that the United States has something of a security commitment to Taiwan. There is some chance that the president of the United States may have to send our armed forces to defend this island. So as Taipei and Washington conduct their relations with Beijing, that sometimes introduces a tension into our bilateral relationship. This situation is not really unique. It is part of a larger phenomenon of allies and quasi-allies of the United States that, like America, are democracies.

But I would also offer the hypothesis that the gap between positive and negative American views of Taiwan's politics – and I would suggest, the crisis of political confidence in Taiwan itself – lies deeper, and is best explained by unmet challenges of Taiwan's democratic consolidation. Here the issue is more one of a gap between expectations and reality. The reason why Americans had – and still have – high hopes for Taiwan's democracy and are willing to support Taiwan because it is a democracy is that it is a system that should perform for the benefit of the Taiwan people.

Democratic Consolidation

Our colleague Shelley Rigger recently published an assessment of Taiwan's democratic consolidation that uses as its basis Larry Diamond's three criteria of democratic deepening, political institutionalization, and regime performance.¹ Without consolidation, Dr. Rigger warns, a system can "retain the formal trappings of democracy . . . but lose the ability to hold elected officials accountable for their actions, provide genuine representation for the public, and guarantee the rights of citizens."² And while she gives Taiwan high marks on respect for civil and political rights and political representation, she is less charitable on other measures. Indeed, she describes a phenomenon in which institutions – semi-presidentialism, the legislature, the party system, the electoral system, and the mass media -- work together in an interlocking way to reduce accountability, foster a *nisi wobuo* [zero-sum] political psychology, promote policy deadlock, ensure suboptimal policy performance, and defer consensus on the rules of the game. But you all knew that.

¹ Shelley Rigger, "The Unfinished Business of Taiwan's Democratic Democratization," in *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.- Taiwan-China Crisis*, edited by Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 16-43.

² Rigger, "Unfinished Business," p. 22.

Our colleague Chu Yun-han provided a similar and even more disturbing analysis earlier this year.³ In the wake of last year's presidential election, he identified old and new "worrying trends" that were "eroding the political elite's commitment to due process and fundamental democratic values as well as its faith in the openness and fairness of the political game." What is worse, he cited polling data that showed declining public support for the superiority of the democratic system, in part because of the government's poor response to the global recession that began in 2000 and, later, the conduct of the 2004 election itself. Not only was the DPP executive unable to root out the corruption from the past, Dr. Chu asserted, but it also gave in to the same temptations itself. Not only did institutions check each other as designed in the constitution, he noted, but some did not perform their expected function. And the emergence of some important institutions of a mature democracy – an autonomous civil society and mass media, a politically neutral civil service, an independent judiciary, and a national military and security apparatus – remains an illusion. Indeed, Dr. Chu sees the contest Greens and the Blues regards control over the state apparatus as a do-or-die battle. But you knew all that as well.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not enumerate these various problems to blame political camp or the other. Whatever our political sympathies, as analysts we seek to be as objective as possible. We can identify, I am sure, points at which individual leaders or parties took actions that contributed to Taiwan's current dilemma. On the other hand, I certainly believe that much of the political behavior that we might criticize is structural in origin, that is, leaders, parties, politicians, and publics are operating, often in spite of themselves, in a democratic order that is only partway constructed. And I would argue that the behavior that we see, which may make sense for the actors in the system but I would say is dysfunctional for the public at large, is going to continue until the democratic order is completely consolidated. That is my view. I know that Dr. Rigger agrees with me, because she says so: "the structural problems in the island's political system predate Chen Shui-bian's presidency. . . . So long as they are not resolved, anyone who accedes to the presidency will be plagued by these same institutional challenges."⁴ I cannot speak for Dr. Chu, but I expect he would he would agree as well.

Let us also be clear on the stakes involved. We have on this island a people who until about thirteen years ago were essentially denied a say in shaping their destiny. They now live in a democratic system that is a great improvement on the past. But an unconsolidated democratic system is not equal to daunting choices that will shape the Taiwan people's future, particularly how to adjust to a China that is growing more powerful economically, militarily, and diplomatically every day. The people of Taiwan deserve better, because the mechanism by which they make and carry out those choices will affect the content and the quality of the choices. If Taiwan's choice mechanism – in effect, the political system – is defective, then the choices will be poor, with profound consequences for present and future generations. Moreover, the *absence* of choices owing to political gridlock or indecision is also a kind of choice which can lead to less than desirable outcomes.

What to Do?

It is one thing to state a problem. It is another thing to prescribe a solution. I believe – or at least I hope – that the movement toward a partial single-member district system for

³ Yun-han Chu, "Taiwan's Democracy at a Turning Point," *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, volume 11, May 2005, pp. 901-924.

⁴ Rigger, "Unfinished Business," p. 43.

legislative system will over time remedy some of the pathologies of the Taiwan system. But without other reforms the impact may be only partial and slow to occur. Look at how slowly it has taking similar reforms of the Japanese electoral system to foster a two-party system that is focused more on national policy and less on constituency service. The existing Taiwan system may more enduring in its political impact than we expect.

And even if one can devise a substantive solution to Taiwan's broader problem of democratic consolidation, there will still need to be a political strategy to secure its adoption through the political process, which may well have a vested interest in opposing broad-scale reform. That Lee Teng-hui was able to devise such a strategy in the early 1990s to bring about Taiwan's democratic transition is both evidence that it can be done and how difficult and messy incremental reform can be. In the middle of the process, no-one is happy with the results. I would wager that the process of democratic consolidation will be even more messy and dissatisfying than it was for democratic transition. That is not a reason not to try. But it is a reason for inspired leadership.

Part of any strategy for democratic consolidation is likely to be the same as one of the critical elements in the strategy of democratic transition. That was the centrist coalition between moderates in the KMT and the DPP. I would wager that after the last five years it will be harder to assemble that coalition than it was in the early 1990s. Again, that is not a reason not to try, but it is a reason for inspired leadership.

Public attitudes – fostering popular confidence – will be an important element of any strategy for democratic consolidation. Here again, the last five years and Dr. Han's evidence of declining confidence in democracy as the best system deflate the momentum of democratic consolidation. And it is probably the case that consolidation is harder when national identity is unresolved. Again, that is not a reason not to try, but it is a reason for inspired leadership.

But let me offer the prediction that if Taiwan embarks on the reform project of democratic consolidation so that the Taiwan people will have a better political system through which make their fundamental choices, the United States will support the effort. As a democracy, we cannot oppose the improvement institutional governance, accountability, and policy performance by a fellow democracy. That was not the issue in 2003 and 2004.

A Challenge

Up until now, I do not think I have said a single thing that you do not already know or could not have quickly surmised. As a profession, you understand the politics of this island better than anybody, certainly better than someone like me who happens to have a political science degree but never did sophisticated research on the island's politics. All I have proven is that I can fill twenty minutes with an articulate – or not so articulate – statement of the obvious.

But now I am going to say something that is not so obvious and which you may not expect. I do this with a bit of reluctance. I fear you may think that I am an arrogant foreigner trying to impose my views. Accept what I have to say as the heartfelt suggestion of a friend and colleague.

Because you are all extremely intelligent, because you all care about the future of this island, and because you understand its political system better than anybody else, let me suggest that as a profession you can make a special contribution in the years ahead. That contribution is first to challenge Taiwan's politicians to transcend the dysfunctional stalemate in which they are trapped, and second it is to chart, as a profession, an agenda for

democratic consolidation that can be the basis for reform action when political circumstances are ripe.

I know that this will not be easy to do since collective action is never easy. I am sure that political sympathies in Taiwan's political science profession reflect the political spectrum of society as a whole. Yet I urge you to try. If the profession can somehow speak as a profession, it can have a profound impact on the political class and on the public. And it will be in the best tradition of principled action by intellectuals in Chinese culture.