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"A nation must think before it acts." - Robert Strausz-Hupé

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IT'S OLD VERSUS NEW IN TAIWAN'S PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

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With just under four months to go, Taiwan's election season is well underway. On January 16, voters will choose a new president and legislature. While aspects of this year's elections are unprecedented, there are also echoes of a presidential election 15 years ago.

The biggest news is Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ying-wen's wide lead in the polls. In the past, the DPP has struggled to win more than 45% of the vote in national elections (its two presidential victories were squeakers – Chen Shui-bian won with 39% of the vote in a three-way race in 2000 and with 50.1% in 2004), but polls taken so far this year suggest Tsai will break that barrier with ease.

Another novel development is that both major parties have nominated female candidates. The DPP's Tsai is a Western-trained lawyer whose past experience includes working as a trade negotiator and heading Taiwan's cabinet-level Mainland Affairs Council as well as serving in the legislature. She sought the presidency unsuccessfully four years ago and has spent much of her time since building support among DPP activists, leaders, and office-holders and assembling a grassroots machine to mobilize votes in January.

The other major-party contender is Hung Hsiu-chu, a former teacher and long-time legislator from Taiwan's current ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist Party. Hung is a bit of an accidental candidate. She joined the race when other leading KMT figures who were widely expected to run were hesitating; many observers believe her goal was to pull others into the race. Instead, the party's heavy-hitters stayed out, and when the KMT held its nominating convention in July, it confirmed Hung as the nominee. Although Hung should benefit from the KMT's vast political networks and hefty war chest, her positions – especially regarding relations with the PRC – put her well outside the mainstream of Taiwan's electorate, while her fiery personality (her nickname is "Little Hot Pepper") contrasts with Tsai's lawyerly demeanor. (Her calm, deliberate style helps explain Tsai's culinary nickname, kongxin cai, which is a leafy vegetable whose name is a homophone for "empty hearted-Tsai.")

Just when it seemed Taiwan was destined to elect its first female president, in blew a blast from the past: perennial candidate James Soong (Soong Chu-yu). On August 8, Soong announced he would join the race; if he wins, Taiwan will have to wait at least another four years to inaugurate its first Madame President.

This is Soong's third try at the presidential office – fourth if you count his 2004 vice presidential run. In 2000, Soong's independent bid opened a space for the DPP's Chen Shui-bian to end the KMT's 55-year political stranglehold. Soong broke with the party in which he had built his political career after it nominated his rival, Lien Chan. He finished well ahead of Lien, but Chen edged him out by two percentage points. In 2004 Soong agreed to run on the KMT ticket as Lien's vice presidential

running mate, but the two fell a few thousand votes short of replacing Chen. Running on the Peoples First Party (PFP) ticket in 2012, Soong won less than 3 percent of the vote.

The question for this year is which of those previous attempts, if any, will serve as a model. At the moment, polls suggest Soong is ahead of Hung. If that's the case, and given the weakness of Hung's campaign, the 2000 scenario is looking more and more likely: a conservative split between Soong and Hung opening the door for a DPP victory. The biggest difference with 2000 is that unlike Chen Shui-bian, Tsai might well win even without a split in the conservative camp. She is currently polling above Hung and Soong's combined shares. Nonetheless, with 25 percent of voters still undecided there is room for the race to tighten.

Shortly after Soong entered the race Hung suspended her campaign, prompting speculation that she might drop out. While Hung returned to the campaign trail after a few days, her muddled candidacy has left her party in a tough position. Several KMT legislative candidates have either dropped out of their races or switched parties to avoid being dragged down by Hung's flailing campaign.

Tsai's strong lead in the presidential polling has shifted attention to the legislative contests and raised questions about how a change in legislative leadership might affect Taiwan's domestic and foreign policies as well as its developing democracy.

In 2008 Taiwan held legislative elections under newly-implemented rules that combine 73 single-member districts with 34 seats determined by party-based proportional voting, as well as 6 seats reserved for the island's Aboriginal peoples. In 2008 and 2012, first-past-the-post voting favored the KMT, which currently holds 65 of the 113 seats. Even in a year where the DPP enjoys a huge lead in the presidential race, structural factors – including provisions that guarantee representation for two small KMT-dominated districts as well as the staunchly pro-KMT Aboriginal constituencies – will make it hard for the Democratic Progressives to pick up the 17 seats they need for outright majority.

The composition of the legislature will make a huge difference in what Tsai is able to do if she becomes president. If the KMT retains a majority (or is able to cobble together a veto coalition with independents and PFP members), Tsai could find herself facing an obstructionist legislature bent on taking revenge on the DPP, which has managed to deny the current president – the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou – several important victories.

If the DPP wins a majority of legislative seats, Tsai will face with both opportunities and threats. She will have the institutional resources to govern, but the electorate is hoping for solutions to some very intractable problems. Tsai is campaigning on a promise to turn around Taiwan's tough economic circumstances, in part by easing the pressure on the island's beleaguered middle class. Even with a legislative majority behind her, she will be hard-pressed to deliver solutions to complex distributional problems that confront developed economies around the world – not to mention successfully managing a touchy relationship with mainland China. With a DPP majority in the legislature, Tsai will have no one to blame if her efforts fall short of expectations.

Another possibility is that the DPP may come close to a majority, but not quite make it. In that case, Tsai and her party will be forced to govern by coalition – very likely on an issue-by-issue basis. A number of small parties are contesting legislative seats, and most of them could find common cause with the DPP on at least some issues. Even Soong's PFP has voiced positions on economic issues that overlap with the DPP's. But issue-by-issue negotiations are a hard way to govern, so the DPP is doing everything it can to maximize its seat share.

Ironically, if the KMT loses its majority, one of the long-standing sources of frustration for the party leadership may be alleviated – just in time to benefit a new president. For the past seven years, Ma Ying-jeou has been forced to share power with the legislative speaker, a KMT politician named Wang Jin-pyng. Wang has exerted extraordinary control over the legislature. Very little happens there without his say-so, and he has never allowed the body to be used as a rubber stamp for the government, even when the KMT had a supermajority. Instead, Wang has cultivated a system of inter-party negotiation that guarantees any party with three or more seats a role in the process.

Although small parties appreciate being included in the process, many in the KMT criticize Wang's approach for slowing the legislative process and preventing the democratically-elected majority from implementing its initiatives. In 2013 the Ma administration's frustration boiled over: during a brief trip abroad, Wang found himself facing influence-peddling accusations. A few days later he was expelled from the party – a move that, had it stuck, would have deprived him of his legislative seat and the speaker's chair. Wang fought back, and the courts ruled that he could not be expelled. Bad blood left over from that

incident is part of the reason for the chaos in the KMT this year.

If the KMT loses its majority, Wang will lose his role as speaker, and a new speaker – especially one chosen from a hung parliament – is unlikely to enjoy the level of power and autonomy he accumulated over his many years as speaker. The likely result will be to shift power toward the presidential office, especially if the DPP winds up presiding over a unified government. That may well be a positive change, because legislative-executive gridlock has prevented Taiwan from taking action on important policy matters.

In short, these elections could bring a shake-up in Taiwan's political landscape that goes far beyond a turn-over of executive power. Stay tuned!