

Considering the Politics of East Asia: South Korea and Taiwan

By *Shiraishi Takashi*

THIS past March, a presidential election was held in Taiwan, and the incumbent president, Chen Shui-bian, and vice-president, Annette Lu of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) narrowly defeated Lien Chan, chairman of the opposition Kuomintang Party (KMT), and James Soong, chairman of the People First Party (PFP), as a presidential and vice-presidential candidate respectively. The difference in the votes received was just over 29,000, with the winner gaining a minuscule 0.22% victory.

The South Korean National Assembly elections were held in April. Procedures for the impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun were passed by the National Assembly – a historical first – and Roh was prohibited from carrying out any duties, so the elections took place under unprecedented conditions. In that sense, the election turned into a vote of confidence on Roh. Of the National Assembly's 299 total seats, the opposition Uri Party made a dramatic leap from 49 seats to a majority of 152 seats, while the Grand National Party (GNP) which had held 137 seats fell to second place with 121 seats. In addition, the new leftist Democratic Labour Party (DLP) took 10 seats. For the first time since the establishment of the country in 1948, the national legislature was no longer controlled by conservative forces but by the progressives (the Uri Party) and a leftist party.

What tendencies are observable from the elections in South Korea and Taiwan?

Let us first consider the case of South Korea. The opposition GNP, hoping to take full advantage of the "powerful medicine" of Roh's impeachment, invited resistance from the electorate, and the governing Uri Party gained the position of the top political party. In regard to the significance of this election, three points are generally made. First, in the election the progressives

who support the Roh administration gained a stable majority. As a result, it is becoming a real issue whether the National Security Law will be changed in the National Assembly. This law was passed in August 1948, three months after South Korea was established, and it treats North Korea as an "anti-State group," establishing severe punishments – including the death penalty – for those who break the law. It is this law which has been used as a tool by successive military administrations in South Korea to suppress democratic movements. For example, former President Kim Dae-jung was charged under this law regarding the Kwangju Incident of 1980, and under its regulations he was once sentenced to death. A revision of the National Security Law therefore signifies that democratization is making further advances in South Korea.

Second, through this election, the so-called "Three Kims" era – referring to Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam and Kim Chong-p'il – has come to an end. This is powerfully underlined by the fact that although Kim Chong-p'il (United Liberal Democrats) was listed as the top of the list of candidates for a seat in the proportional representation contingent, he failed to win his ten successive election.

Third, there has been a generational change in the National Assembly. Of those 299 who won seats in this election, 89 incumbents accounted for 29.8%, while the 187 first-time elected members accounted for 62.5%. Particularly within the Uri Party, which won 152 seats, 71.7% (109 seats) went to first-timers. In terms of their age groups, the 30 to 50-year-old group accounted for 250 members (83.3%) – 23 in their 30s (7.5%), 106 in their 40s (35.4%) and 121 in their 50s (40.4%).

Frequently pointed out as an undercurrent for such change is the increasing prominence of the "Generation 386" –

"3" referring to the fact that they turned 30 in the 1990s, "8" to their attending university in the 1980s and "6" to their birth in the 1960s. This generation has not experienced Japanese control as a colony or the Korean War of 1950-53. What they have experienced is economic development under the authoritarian leader Park Chung-hee and the student movement opposing oppressive political rule in the 1980s. As a consequence, they take peace and prosperity as a natural course of events; maintain doubts about the emphasis on economic growth held by their forebears; deny the assertion of authority based on academic cliques, local power bases and elder statesmen symbolized by the "Three-Kims" Politics; and turn their backs on the nationalism of the older generation.

What do they seek from politics? What is important regarding their rise to power is how South Korean nationalism will be expressed in the coming period and what kind of role South Korea will play internationally. Three major factors can be pointed out. First is the tendency, in contrast with their parents' generation, to see North Korea not as an "enemy" but rather as "family," and in regard to America they seek a relationship based not on protection and support but on equality. The second factor is friendliness toward China. For example, 63% of the Uri Party members who were elected said that China should be seen as the most significant nation both diplomatically and commercially. (Compared to this figure, those who mentioned America amounted to 26% and those who mentioned Japan amounted to no more than 2%.) Third is the hard-line attitude toward Japan regarding such issues as the Prime Minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine and history textbooks.

To sum up, the "Generation 386" can be seen as moving strongly toward nationalism. However, that nationalism has not yet taken a clear new form.

Therefore, while it welcomes democratization on the one hand, it is China-friendly and anti-American, and now, half a century after the end of Japan's colonization of Korea, there are issues with Japan regarding the burying of the past. However, South Korea already boasts the world's 11th largest economy and is one of the world's few military states. It is now up to this generation to determine an appropriate international role for their country.

In Taiwan as well, the problem of nationalism is of great concern. It is quite evident that the greatest factor in the victory of Chen Shiu-bian and Annette Lu was the upsurge of the sense of identity of the Taiwanese. In fact, had it not been for this rise in Taiwanese consciousness, Chen, in comparison with the elections of 2000, would not have succeeded in garnering approximately 1.5 million votes – some 10.8%. What is the significance of this?

Facing one another across the Taiwan Strait are two nations bearing the name "China" as part of their official name*, and while there is a great disparity in their attitudes toward political relations, for over 30 years they have managed to avoid military conflict. Wakabayashi Masahiro, a prominent researcher on Taiwan, refers to the maintenance of this condition as the "1972 regime," and says that the premises upon which this set-up is based are gradually disappearing. ("A Moment of Truth" in *Ronza*, May 2004) There are two major reasons for this.

One of these, quite naturally, is the rise of Taiwanese nationalism seeking "independence." Riding the wave of this nationalism, Chen managed to win re-election in the presidential race. Further, this nationalism will probably increase in strength among the younger generation. The second reason is the expansion and deepening of the economic ties between China and Taiwan. As a result of this, at present, out of Taiwan's population of 22 million, over one million Taiwanese reside permanently in mainland China. Taiwanese enterprises are bound to continue mak-



Photo: REUTERS • SUN

South Korean soldiers remove loudspeakers set up for propaganda purposes near the demilitarized zone

ing inroads on the mainland. It is impossible to reverse this trend, and even if it did happen, it may lead to a severe crisis in the Taiwanese economy.

Within this major trend, what will happen in Taiwanese politics in the years to come? As is regularly pointed out, the major keys are a public referendum and an amendment of the Constitution. The referendum, which was held at the same time as the presidential election, did not obtain the required voting rate of 50%, so the referendum was not approved. However, if it were approved, and if the citizens were asked whether they hoped that Taiwan would become a special administrative region within the People's Republic of China in a "one nation two systems" organization, almost everyone in Taiwan would in all likelihood vote against this. In that sense, the referendum is a significant means of grasping the feelings of Taiwan's people.

On the other hand, constitutional revision would change the current separation of five powers into a three-power

format and reform the National Assembly, probably resulting in a reorganization of the state. If such a new constitutional structure were to be established, the unification faction would lose power in the national legislature in the near future and the Republic of China would become de facto independent Taiwan without having to be renamed "Republic of Taiwan."

From this perspective, in the relationship between China and Taiwan, it is clear that Taiwan is in an advantageous position. China's "one country two systems" formula as a means of unifying the two has already collapsed. All China can do is "wait." The issue is the Taiwanese people's sense of balance, and like the "Generation 386" in South Korea, it remains to be seen what new form a mature nationalism will take. **JS**

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*Note : Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China