

Taiwan election holds lessons for Singapore

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On 11 December 2004, the proud citizens of Taiwan marked another political milestone in their short democratic history. Not only did they successfully elect the first batch of legislators since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) retained office in the Executive Yuan early this March but, remarkably, despite the fervent campaigning and media frenzy, the Taiwanese people had demonstrated to the world that the transition to democracy can be achieved without violence.

As part of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats (CALD) delegation, of which the SDP is a member, I was honoured to be there during the last week leading up to the elections to witness the energy and vibe of some of the DPP candidates in Taipei, Kaohsiung and Tainan. I was extremely impressed with the campaign offices of each candidate as their volunteers and supporters worked tirelessly around the clock to rally for votes. Though some of them received meagre pay for their work, they did not mind making the sacrifices. Losing precious sleep and toiling for hours under wintry conditions were minor inconveniences because they truly treasured and enjoyed their hard-won democracy.

During one of our visits to the campaign offices, one of the DPP's Tainan candidates had to address us with a microphone because the delegation was too huge to fit into her campaign office and we found ourselves sitting on the side of the road. Our presence and the commotion attracted a small crowd but unlike Singapore, the local authorities did not halt the peaceful political gathering which took place without a permit.

There was another instance that demonstrated the impartial professionalism of the police. We had been traveling with some DPP candidates in Taipei and the motorcade became rather long. Immediately, police stepped in and escorted the chain of vehicles to ensure that the procession proceeded smoothly and safely with minimum disruption to traffic. This service was provided for the Pan-Blue coalition (led by the Kuomintang) as well. I wondered to myself when in Singapore will we ever get to witness such impartiality from the state authorities!

On another occasion a DPP campaign manager in Kaohsiung city hosted a lunch for our delegation. Before lunch began, however, he asked if any of the delegates was a resident of Kaohsiung. We all shook our heads and laughed as we thought that he was just joking. Little did we realize that he was dead serious. This is because under the strict campaigning rules laid down by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), no candidate is allowed to offer any form of gift which costs more than NT\$30 (approximately S\$1.50), to any prospective voter in order to eradicate vote-buying. All political parties - ruling or opposition - are bound by this law. My mind immediately went back to the 2001 elections in Singapore during which the PAP gave voters New Singapore Shares.

I learnt a great deal about the CEC when we paid them a visit. It is an essentially impartial election watchdog because political parties from both the Pan Blue & Pan

Green (DPP coalition) camps are invited to appoint non-partisan nominees to the Commission. No party is allowed to have more than half the number of total nominees on both the national and district level. This is to prevent any one party or coalition of parties from dominating the Commission.

Also, corporations who sponsor a candidate in the elections are entitled to tax subsidies. This is to encourage active citizenry participation in the electoral process.

The government also matches each vote for candidates who retain their deposit with NT\$30 per vote. Thus, federal funding is available for all candidates to help them defray election expenses if they meet the minimum requirement. This ensures that not only rich candidates or rich parties have the ability to run effective campaigns.

The DPP were disappointed that it failed to obtain the majority in the Legislative Yuan. It could take heart, however, from the fact that the proportional representation system ensured that they were fairly represented in the house unlike Singapore's "first-past-the-post" system where 40 per cent of votes for the opposition translates into 5 per cent of the seats.

I was also struck by President Chen Shiu-Bian who graciously conceded defeat and, in a statesman-like manner, announced that the voice of the Taiwanese people must be respected. He then resigned as chairman of the DPP to signal that he was bent on becoming the "people's" President rather than a "Pan-Green" President. He invited the opposition to bury all political differences and to form the next cabinet to work for the common good of the nation. Contrast this to the PAP's vindictive and petty insistence that only those who voted for it will get their flats and estates upgraded.

At the end of the day, it was the Taiwanese people who had scored a political victory because they had exercised their political rights to ensure that there was a strong opposition presence to check and balance the power of the ruling party - rights that Singaporeans have been deprived of in the pseudo-democracy such as ours.

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