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Taiwan after the Sunflowers: Continuities and Uncertainties

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Significance

Despite the unprecedented occupation of Parliament in March and April, Taiwanese politics have returned to 'normal', with little surprises expected in the year-end nine-in-one municipal elections. However, all the elements that brought about the political crisis in the spring are still in play, and those have the potential to shake up politics as the island heads for presidential and legislative elections in 2016. With President Ma scrambling to accomplish his objectives before he steps down in May that year, and amid signs that the pro-independence DPP could make significant gains in, if not win, the 2016 race, the next 18 months promise to be a period of volatility domestically, which in turn could impact Taiwan's relations with China on several fronts.

What we need to know

The 24-day occupation of the Legislative Yuan by thousands of members of the 'Sunflower Movement' in March and April 2014, and the overnight occupation of the Executive Yuan, led observers to conclude that the political scene would be changed forever. Civil society had demonstrated its ability to challenge the institutions of governance and brought the legislature to a standstill, forcing a halt in negotiations over a trade pact with China. Despite official accusations of violence and irrationality levelled at the activists, a public majority rallied behind the movement, with between 350,000 and 500,000 people participating in a March 30 rally in Taipei. For a while,

President Ma Ying-jeou's leadership seemed threatened. His popularity ratings dropped to a 9.2%. The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), of which Ma is chairman, was split. And a legal battle with Wang Jin-pyng, the popular speaker of the legislature who was open to concessions with the Sunflowers, had turned against Ma. It was said that the president had been neutralized, that members of his party would force him to step down as chairman, which would undermine his ability to stay the course on China.

Yet Ma survived the crisis, and he appears to have succeeded in quieting dissenters within his party, where he is currently more feared than loved. Negotiations with Beijing have resumed, and Ma, who must step down in May 2016 after serving two consecutive terms, is running out of time and patience. Meanwhile, the Sunflower Movement has splintered and has failed to translate the popular discontent it had channelled so effectively during the occupation into a force that can have an impact on future elections. Furthermore, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has not capitalized on the discontent with the KMT or the 'Sunflower effect' and Taiwanese voters remain wary of the party's ability to govern, especially after two lacklustre years under Su Tseng-chang's chairmanship.

As such, the recent political developments are unlikely to have a major impact on the nine-in-one elections on Nov. 29, which will be fought on predominantly local issues rather than the ideology, politics, and macroeconomics that alimeted the Sunflower Movement and which are normally a greater factor in presidential elections. Therefore, while continuity is expected through the year-end elections, national politics, identity issues, and the 'China factor' will re-emerge from 2015 until the presidential race in 2016. Developments in Hong Kong, which many Taiwanese are following very closely, will also affect perceptions of China and 'unification' among Taiwanese. Incidents, mass arrests, perhaps even bloodshed, will have serious consequences on the government's ability to deepen ties with Beijing, due to attendant growing domestic pressures in Taiwan.

While President Ma succeeded in weathering the Sunflower crisis, the underlying factors that engendered it have not been addressed. Recent moves by Taiwan's law enforcement and security apparatus giving them expanded powers to deal with protests could indicate that the state is preparing for greater unrest. President Ma's impatience, combined with activist groups that, though disorganized for the time being have not been defeated, is a recipe for trouble, as both sides have made it clear that they will not give an inch.

Meanwhile, a re-energized DPP under chairperson Tsai Ing-wen, who is actively engaging China behind the scenes in hopes of finding a *modus vivendi*, will pose a solid challenge to the KMT in 2016, even more so if it succeeds in allying itself with civil society. Despite their disagreements, the DPP and social movements will be forced to strike an alliance of convenience through 2016. By recruiting several former Sunflower activists into her party, Tsai, who is expected to be the DPP candidate in 2016, seems to have understood the necessity of such an alliance.

Still, her willingness to expand the scope of her party's engagement with China could allow Beijing to play the KMT against the DPP in a race to see which party can deliver the most in cross-strait relations and thus force the DPP in a direction it did not want to go, one which is certain to poison the party's relations with social movements.

For its part, the U.S. remains wary of the DPP, mostly for what it regards as an unfocused China policy and, above all, its 'pro-independence' stance. Obsessed with stability in the Taiwan Strait, Washington could therefore feel compelled to intervene, as it did in late 2011, in a way that advantages the KMT, which it regards as a more reliable, or at least predictable, actor. However, given the current context, any move on Washington's part that limits the choices Taiwanese can make on cross-strait issues could fuel anti-American sentiment on the island and provoke further unrest.

Uncertainty, and perhaps greater political instability, will thus characterize President Ma's last 18 months in office.

Plus ça change...

The Nov. 29 elections will be the largest in the country's history. A total of 11,130 public servants in six special municipalities as well as counties, villages, townships and Aboriginal communities will vie for various positions as mayors, councilors, chiefs and representatives. The DPP, which describes the elections as President Ma's 'mid-term', is cautiously optimistic about its prospects. Tsai Ing-wen, who reassumed the position of party chair nearly two years after stepping down following her defeat in the 2012 presidential election, has said that the DPP is confident it can secure nine or ten of the 22 races for mayor and commissioner (it currently only controls six, despite coming on top in the popular vote in the last election).

In light of the current situation, several factors could hurt the KMT's performance in the November elections, including a stagnant economy, low approval rates for both Ma and the party, and the potential aftereffects of the Sunflower occupation. Still, the impact of those variables will be mitigated by several factors, such as the DPP's own relatively low support levels and its failure in recent years to connect with civil society locally in times of substantial discontent and when complementarity should therefore have come naturally. Moreover, the KMT continues to enjoy a clear advantage in terms of financial resources and control of the 'grassroots'. Blaming limited resources, the DPP has historically tended not to field representatives in communities where it judges it cannot win, which has often sparked accusations that it has simply 'given up' and is denying residents the right to an alternative (on some occasions that DPP strategy has been to support independent candidates).

Additionally, the DPP's claims of a 'mid-term' notwithstanding, voters in municipal elections tend to dissociate those from the 'high' politics that are associated with matters such as the 'China factor', Taiwan's international relations, free trade, and so on—issues that were at the core of the Sunflower Movement's occupation. Thus,

besides longstanding (though by no means are those set in stone) voting preferences according to the municipalities (e.g., Taipei as 'blue', or KMT, and Tainan as 'green', or DPP), the issues that matter to voters in those elections are predominantly local in nature. Consequently, a candidate's platform on schools, public transportation, the development of the local economy, and public safety, among others, will be far more influential on voting decisions than whether the KMT properly handled negotiations on a controversial services trade agreement with China. Recent incidents, such as the gas pipeline explosions in Kaohsiung, in which 30 people died and 300 were injured, will also have an impact on election outcomes, and could threaten the DPP's hitherto invincibility in the city, the nation's second largest. Simply put, 'what can you do for me and my family' remains the key factor in those elections, with party politics and state matters being a secondary consideration.

A relatively new factor in the elections will be the influence of China, which is increasingly using its financial power to sway voters. Although such behavior was observed during national elections, Beijing is now clearly attempting to exercise its influence at the local level, often by bypassing the government altogether and dealing directly with local representatives (Li Zhang), trade associations, and Aboriginal leaders. More often than not, such activities have involved financial donations, presumably to encourage local residents to vote for candidates who favor closer ties with China. Such contacts are known to have occurred regularly in Hualien County. Furthermore, such efforts are augmented by the activities of pro-unification parties, such as the Unification Party led by ex-gangster Chang An-le ('White Wolf'), which have opened campaign offices nationwide and are engaging in 'philanthropy'. Although it is difficult to quantify the impact that such donations will have on voters, the greater ease with which China can now direct funds into Taiwan at the local level (via investors, officials, tourists and underground agents) could become a factor.

Scattered sunflowers and the coming uncertainty

While the nine-in-one elections will for the most part be a continuation of politics as usual, things could be very different in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential and legislative elections. In those, the issues that will matter most—relations with China, the sovereignty question, and the economy—are also those that sparked the Sunflower Movement’s occupation in early 2014. And although the Ma administration appears to have emerged relatively unscathed from the crisis (a minority argues that the occupation ‘neutralized’ Ma), the volatile ingredients that led to the popular uprising remain and could mix again to cause further instability. As the leaders of the Sunflower Movement announced when they exited the legislature on April 10, they had agreed to stand down because the movement and the administration had agreed to a truce initiated by Speaker Wang, which included agreement on an oversight mechanism, one of the movement’s demands. However, they warned that if the proper mechanisms were not implemented, they would resume their activism.

Since then, there have been indications that the administration could renege on its promise. Negotiations with China have resumed, and the pressure on Taipei to sign additional agreements, and perhaps to initiate highly controversial talks on Taiwan’s political status, before Ma steps down will be contingent on Beijing’s appreciation of the domestic pressures within Taiwan. Sensing that he is running out of time, Ma seems keen on accomplishing as much as he can before his second (and last) term expires, and may therefore be tempted to downplay opposition to his China policies. One indication that this might be what lies ahead is the preparations that have been made to increase the powers of law enforcement agencies amid social unrest. Among other things, government agencies have bolstered their Internet monitoring capabilities with the creation of three new agencies (under the National Police Agency, the Executive Yuan, and the KMT) and police have been given the authority to ‘pre-emptively’ detain repeat offenders on an expanded list of crimes, many of which seem to be directly targeted at the charismatic leaders of the Sunflower Movement.

The resumption of activities between Taiwan and China, punctuated by the June visit by Taiwan Affairs Office Minister Zhang Zhijun, negotiations on a trade-in-goods agreement and talks on the opening of representative offices on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, occurs at a time of crisis within the Sunflower Movement. That breathing space was created by several factors, including the splintering of the movement, lack of strategic thought among the leadership, infighting, and resentment over the 'superstar' status achieved by its young leaders. Furthermore, the activists have yet to find a way to turn their oppositional activism into actionable policy options, and have tended to regard members who decided to join political parties (at the invitation of Tsai of the DPP) as 'traitors'.

This loss of momentum was probably inevitable, given the uncertainty that surrounded the period immediately after the occupation. However, the Ma administration would be taking grave risks if it ignored the ability of the movement to regroup. The persistence of the dozens of smaller precursor groups that coalesced into the Sunflower Movement leaves no doubt as to their willingness to resume their activities if necessary, even if they are threatened by the authorities. Moreover, the heterogeneous nature of its members is such that activism, animated as it is by 'civic nationalism' rather than age-old and divisive 'ethnic' issues, ensures that opposition to the administration will continue to transcend 'green' versus 'blue' politics, which thus makes defeating those forces all the more challenging.

Consequently, if the authorities adopt a course of action that is seen as compromising Taiwan's security, the activists are likely to escalate again. Given the increased police powers, this could signify greater unrest, and perhaps even serious violence, in the period between 2015 and 2016. Whether we see unrest or stability during that year will be contingent on the government's willingness to take public fears into account—arguably not one of President Ma's strong points—and its ability to withstand pressure from Beijing. As such, the KMT holds the key to whether the Sunflower Movement, or a successor movement, will be an important variable in the 2016 elections. If the Ma administration adopts a more careful approach to cross-strait relations by slowing

down the pace of negotiations (as some believe it will, convinced that Ma has given Beijing everything that he could already) and avoiding political talks, it will likely succeed in further defusing the impact of social forces. Ongoing developments in Hong Kong, where the viability of the 'one country, two systems' formula is all but dead, could also influence perceptions in Taiwan by stoking fears of a repeat in Taiwan should the island move too close to China.

Conversely, the DPP could be a much more formidable opponent in the 2016 elections if it succeeds in bridging the immense gap that currently exists between politicians and civil society. Unless the party manages to reconnect with society, the DPP cannot take it for granted that those who supported the Sunflower Movement, or even those who participated in it, would necessarily vote for it. According to many activists interviewed by the author, the DPP was also part of the systemic failure that forced society to take action, and asked who they would vote for in 2016, many said that absent a third force, they probably would not vote.

Lastly, another factor in the 2016 election will be the U.S., and whether the White House and the National Security Council (NSC) decide to express favoritism, as they did in the lead-up to 2012. For historical reasons and in light of the current geopolitical situation, Washington is extremely wary of the DPP, which is seen as least reliable and more likely to cause tensions in the Taiwan Strait than the KMT, regardless of who represents the latter in 2016. The deeply ingrained (but misinformed) belief that the Sunflower Movement was a creation of the DPP, which resorted to 'undemocratic' street politics to fight its opponent, has also compounded those suspicions. The strong anti-American sentiment among the Sunflowers' leadership is also complicating the relationship between the DPP and civil society on one side, and the U.S. on the other.

A reliable source has learned from a recent meeting of the U.S. NSC that unless DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen 'freezes' the independence clause in the party charter and agrees to a formula such as the '1992 consensus' or a 'one China' framework, it would again intervene (using a small group of senior academics) to sabotage the DPP

candidate's chances in the 2016 elections. Although freezing the independence clause (a symbolic move, as no DPP administration would dare to declare independence at this point) would assuage fears in the U.S. and perhaps convince Taiwanese swing voters to vote for the DPP, doing so would also risk alienating the party's support base. Better explaining its cross-strait policy will help the DPP regain some confidence in Washington, D.C., but only to a point. It remains handicapped by deep suspicions and strained relations during the Chen Shui-bian administration (2000-2008). Still, pressure on Taiwan from the U.S. to adopt policies that are counter to public opinion, especially on China, will complicate the domestic situation, and could result in greater unrest and thus make sure that the Sunflower Movement or its successor become a major factor in the 2016 elections.

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