

Taiwan: Plebiscite push raises democratic expectations

Thursday 18 January 2007, by [CHENG Eva](#) (Date first published: 4 November 2003).

Democratic expectations in Taiwan have surged with President Chen Shui-bian's promotion of plebiscites to ascertain the views of the island's 23 million people on "major social issues".

Chen became Taiwan's second popularly elected president in March 2000. However, according to a mid-September poll taken by Chen's party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), his support has slumped to just 31.6%, almost 5% behind his rival from the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT).

With a presidential election scheduled for March 20, there is a growing belief that Chen is pushing for plebiscites as a means to recoup support by again tapping the population's significant aspiration for formal independence from China. Chen won the 2000 election mainly on the basis of his support for Taiwan's independence.

The pro-imperialist, capitalist KMT regime fled to Taiwan in 1949 after it lost the civil war against the Communist Party and took control of the island. For centuries, China's emperors had ruled Taiwan against the will of its original inhabitants and subsequent waves of migrants from China. (Between 1895 and 1945, Japan occupied Taiwan after defeating the Chinese emperor in a war).

The corrupt KMT and its Chinese functionaries ruled Taiwan as yet another "alien" power, with great brutality (martial law was only lifted in 1987), provoking a strong rejection of rule by "mainlanders" among Taiwan's population. They similarly rejected Beijing's pressure for Taiwan to be "reintegrated" into China. KMT rule did not end until 2000.

Independence plebiscite

There is widespread speculation that Chen will sooner or later initiate a plebiscite to formalise Taiwan's de facto independence from China. Chen claims he has no plans to hold such a plebiscite, but few believe him. Nor does Beijing or Washington. Both have in the last few weeks warned Chen against holding a plebiscite on Taiwan's independence.

On September 28, Chen repeated his call for a plebiscite on a new constitution. On October 25, the DPP and its allied parties mobilised 200,000 people in Kaohsiung in Taiwan's south in support of holding plebiscites and a new constitution. Chen is pushing for a plebiscite on a new constitution to coincide with the March 20 presidential vote.

Chen has been floating the idea of plebiscites since he won the presidency. It was first raised in the context of the controversial construction of a nuclear power plant, Taiwan's fourth, but not implemented.

Chen reactivated the plebiscite concept in May after Taiwan failed for the seventh time to win observer status at the World Health Organisation. Beijing's pressure was clearly behind Taiwan's failed bids. Since then, Chen has been advocating a plebiscite to ascertain the Taiwanese people's desire to join the WHO.

Carrying on the efforts of the KMT's Lee Teng-hui, who was president for 12 years until 2000, Chen gave his backing to the campaign to change the name of the Republic of China (Taiwan's formal name) to Taiwan. Lee split from the KMT after leaving the presidency, but remains active in advocating Taiwan's independence.

A key focus of the campaign is to have Taiwan regain a seat in the United Nations. Taipei was stripped of China's UN seat, which was taken over by Beijing, in 1972.

On September 6, on the eve of the September 17 UN session to discuss Taiwan's 11th attempt to rejoin the UN, Lee and Chen joined hands to call a demonstration on the "renaming" issue, attracting 150,000 people. Taipei again failed in its bid.

Chen and Lee aim is to serve the interests of Taiwan's capitalists, despite the fact that they have chosen to mobilise the masses to achieve their goals. The risk for Taiwan's rulers is that the people might get out of their control in the course of taking part in mass actions.

For example, in early October, two counties in two different provinces have held plebiscites on local issues — on whether a highway and a incinerator should be built in their vicinity. On October 5, the Hong Kong-based Ming Pao daily reported that many counties and villages in Taiwan were contemplating holding similar plebiscites on important local issues before the presidential election.

P.S.

From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #560 5 November 2003.