

# Taiwan: Referendum in sight after UN bid failed

Wednesday 3 October 2007, by [CHENG Eva](#) (Date first published: 28 September 2007).

On September 21, the UN General Assembly supported by consensus a decision by the 22-member General Committee not to put Taiwan's bid for UN membership on the assembly's agenda. It was the island's 15<sup>th</sup> application for UN membership in as many years. This year was the first time that the application was made in the name of Taiwan rather than the "Republic of China" (ROC), signalling a more aggressive independence push by President Chen Shui-bian's government.

The UN decision prompted Chen to vow to put the issue of Taiwanese UN membership to the island's nearly 23 million people next March in a referendum that will coincide with the presidential election. This is another step to cement Taiwan's de facto independence and has once again attracted strong condemnation from Beijing. The last time Chen floated the idea of such a referendum was in the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election.

Beijing has vowed that it won't rule out using force to stop any significant steps towards independence. However, under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, the US has the formal right to militarily intervene if Taiwan is "endangered". Washington has expressed its disapproval of holding a referendum.

The US-backed ROC was a founding member of the UN in 1945. This remained the case even after 1949 when the Communist Party of China seized control of the bulk of the country, reducing the ROC's power base to Taiwan and a few neighbouring islets. The membership anomaly was corrected in 1971 when the UN seat was transferred to the People's Republic of China.

Taiwan hasn't had UN representation since then. But in 1993, under independence-minded president Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan applied to "restore" its UN membership. The bid was rejected, with Beijing expressing strong opposition. The effort has been repeated every year, even after the long-ruling Kuomintang (Nationalist) party (KMT) lost the country's presidency to Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2000.

With his popularity waning, made worse by corruption scandals last year, Chen's move to call a referendum, despite a pledge in 2000 not to, seems to be intended to win votes for the DPP's candidate in next year's election. (After serving two terms, Chen is not eligible for stand for presidency again.)

The KMT also sponsored the bid for a UN seat, despite significant pro-unification support within its ranks. It wanted the application to be under the name of ROC or "any other appropriate name".

On September 5, rival protests by the pro-unification and pro-referendum camps were held in Taipei. The "Alliance to Oppose the Referendum to Join the UN" protested in front of the DPP's main office and the "UN for Taiwan" alliance gathered in front of the American Institute in Taiwan — Washington's de facto embassy. The Taiwanese China Post reported that on September 8, the pro-independence "908 Taiwan Republic" movement mobilised more than 100,000 people in Taipei to unveil a new Taiwanese flag and national anthem.

On September 15, more than 20 groups held a 12,000-strong rally in Taipei denouncing the UN bid. On the same day, the KMT attracted 100,000 people to its pro-UN-bid march in Taichung, central Taiwan, and the DPP mobilised 60,000 supporters at a rally in Kaohsiung in the south.

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