

Building an open, digital democracy in Taiwan

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In 2014, the Sunflower Movement rocked the island-nation of Taiwan. A grassroots, youth-driven coalition, they used innovative open source digital organising tools in a broad effort to stop a controversial trade deal with China the then-ruling Kuomintang party was planning to rush through the legislative process. They famously occupied the national parliament for three weeks, and ultimately succeeded in getting many of their demands met.

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"It was a hugely important event for Taiwan, and it really awakened an enthusiasm...and a conviction in young people that politics was still an undertaking they should, and could, put themselves into," says Shelley Rigger, a professor and expert on Taiwanese politics at Davidson University in North Carolina.

Two years later, in an event many connect to the Sunflower protests, the progressive opposition candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, was elected to the Presidency, running on a platform that included several demands of the Sunflower protestors, including a dedication to transparency in governance.

She appointed one of the key players in the 2014 movement, Audrey Tang, to be the country's first-ever Digital Minister, and since then, Taiwan has been making huge strides in digital democracy, citizen empowerment, and even youth civic involvement.

"We see more youth activism and more engagement," says Rigger. "The Sunflower Movement made political involvement cooler."

Increased citizen participation in governance

Since Tsai's election in 2014 there have been several digital tools released in Taiwan to expand citizen participation in governance. These include the national-level platform [VTaiwan](#), the Taipei-city [Ivoting](#) tool, and the legislative-focused [JOIN](#).

One of the first successful uses of digital tools to engage citizens and takeholders in policymaking came when the country was determining regulations for ride-hailing services such as Uber and Grab. In many cities, [Uber has entered without following existing regulations](#), and often then lobbied to force governments to accept their presence.

This hurts existing taxi drivers and gig workers. A recent report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Energy and Environmental Policy Research found that the average Uber

and Lyft driver in the United States makes only US\$3.37 an hour once costs, such as insurance, maintenance, repairs and fuel, are factored in.

In Taiwan, the policymaking process for ride-hailing and taxis was opened up through the VTaiwan platform along with tools such as [Discourse](#), [Pol.is](#), and [Sli.do](#), and offline meetings to ensure that drivers, for example, could also attend. More than 4,500 people participated in total, and their comments were synthesised into seven generally agreed points, which were then translated into regulations.

“When a regulation is done this way, it is actually very difficult for legislators to not pass it,” says Tang, Taiwan’s Digital Minister. “And there was no backlash, because people are generally agreeing with it.”

One entity that did not agree was Uber, who responded by leaving Taiwan. They have since returned but operate on a much smaller scale than in other large markets. [Many consider this a victory for citizens](#), workers and policymakers over a notoriously exploitative company.

While the ride-hailing case was a success, there is much progress to be made. The 2017 Open Government Report released last autumn, analysed how far the Tsai administration has gone towards achieving its transparency and engagement goals. It concluded that Taiwan still had a long way to go.

While tools like VTaiwan put the country ahead of most other democracies in the integration of civic technology, it does not mean engagement is universal. One big challenge the report identified is that many Taiwanese, particularly those outside of the capital Taipei, or elderly citizens, are still unaware of these civic engagement tools.

“For example...if you ask someone on the street, ‘Do you know VTaiwan?’, not many people would say that they know it.” says Mei-chun Lee, a researcher with the Taiwan-based Open Culture Foundation and one of the authors of the report. “That’s a problem. How can we broaden our representation? How can we engage with the general public more to care about issues?”

Researchers found that, outside of a few examples like the ride-hailing case, VTaiwan engagement is low, with Ivoting and JOIN seeing similar challenges. The report called for added investment for outreach and education around the various platforms, and more offline meetings to reach those unfamiliar with mobile or web-based tools.

Tang acknowledges that there are many in the government that are resistant to change, or fearful of being too transparent or using new tools.

“Our mission is to take what was, at that time, a very expensive process and try to do it at scale, which means all the ministries can introduce some of these process innovations in their work,” says Tang.

Taiwan’s regional context

Taiwan is unique in its progress, in a region that is seeing the regression of active democracy. [The Freedom House Democracy Index](#), released earlier this year, found that most countries in the Asia-Pacific region were becoming less free.

This includes Taiwan’s largest neighbour. Because China still considers Taiwan part of its territory,

the country is not a member of the United Nations and cannot fly its flag at the Olympics. Many believe Taiwan's social movements are connected to the country's unique situation, both as a neighbour to China, but also as a young democracy just a few decades removed from its own dictatorship.

"One reason I think the civic tech community is vibrant is because our generation is the first one to enjoy freedom of press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly," says Tang. "And the same people who exercise this also grew up with personal computers and the web."

Moreover, China, which is going through a mass clampdown on freedom of expression, provides a very real juxtaposition between the fragility of democracy and the freedoms that the Taiwanese currently have.

Tsai's victory against the more pro-China Kuomintang party has led to a harsher stance by its dominant neighbour. In the past few months, China has been pushing foreign countries and companies to [stop listing Taiwan as a country](#) on web platforms or labels. The international hotel chain Marriott was blocked online in China for several days after listing Taiwan as an option alongside Tibet as a country in a customer survey. Sweden recently changed Taiwan from a country to a "province of China" on the website of the Swedish Tax Agency.

"Taiwan is one the strongest democracies because is it so threatened," says Rigger. "People will always remember they have to be careful."

For now, Taiwan's hackers and movement activists will continue to build on their democratic progress, but the future will likely depend as much on what happens in Beijing as Taipei.

Nithin Coca

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