

The Shadow of the Sunflowers: How Taiwan's Civic Movements Deal with the China Factor

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Taiwan has seen few protest mobilizations on the scale of what came to be known as the Bluebird Movement in the past decade. Consequently, it may not be surprising that the Bluebird Movement demonstrations were quickly compared to the 2014 Sunflower Movement.

Certainly, the comparison seems apt. Both movements experienced explosive growth in a short period of time. The Bluebird Movement quickly went from several hundred demonstrators for the spontaneous protest that broke out on [the night of May 17th](#) to what organizers claimed to be [over 100,000](#) on May 24th. This is not so different from how the Sunflower Movement occupation of the Legislative Yuan began on [March 18th, 2014](#), and reached a peak of 500,000 demonstrators on [March 30th, 2014](#).

The three major dates of protest after the initial night on May 17th all involved tens of thousands of participants. It has been relatively rare for multiple days of protest to take place within the same few weeks for most social movements in the last decade, outside of demonstrations against [textbook changes in 2015](#) that led to the weeklong occupation of the Ministry of Education, demonstrations regarding the return of Indigenous traditional territories in [2016 and after](#), against [the Labor Standards Act in 2017 and 2018](#), [solidarity rallies for Hong Kong in 2019](#), and [solidarity rallies for Ukraine in 2022](#).

The Bluebird Movement demonstrations were in themselves highly conscious of history, with early framings for the movement terming it in the vein of the Sunflower Movement by commentators and participants themselves. Sunflowers began to be a frequent sight at demonstrations starting on [May 21st](#). At subsequent protests, one began to see allusions to Taiwan's broader history of protest, with lilies also distributed en masse along with sunflowers on [May 24th](#) as an allusion to the 1990 Wild Lily Movement.

It was only just before the last major day of demonstrations to date, [on May 28th](#), that the movement acquired its name—"bluebird," as derived from the visual similarity of the name of the main street that demonstrations took place on—Qingdao East Road (青島東路)—to "bluebird" (藍鳥). This breaks from the pattern of major social movements in Taiwan, such as the 1990 Wild Lily Movement, 2008 Wild Strawberry Movement, and 2014 Sunflower Movement, being named after plants.

It may be that the Sunflower Movement will continue to cast a large shadow over subsequent social movements in Taiwan. Part of this is simply due to size, again, with more than 500,000 taking to the streets of Taipei on March 30th, 2014. Yet this may also be due to length, seeing as the Sunflower Movement lasted for 23 days.

By comparison, the Wild Lily movement was only a six-day occupation of what is now known as Liberty Plaza. Though the Wild Strawberry Movement also lasted for around a month, the movement

was much smaller in scale. But, even if largely led by the same cluster of civil society groups that played a pivotal role in the Sunflower Movement, as with preceding movements in Taiwanese history, the Bluebird Movement protests politically mobilized a number of high school and college students.

Likewise, one notes that even pan-Blue social movements in the decade since the Sunflower Movement were often reacting to its lingering influence. Protests by [veterans opposed](#) to the Tsai administration's pension reforms who tried to occupy the legislature on several occasions, or by [the KMT party caucus](#) against the Tsai administration opening up of Taiwan to US pork imports, were discursively following the script set by the Sunflower Movement, in the hopes that their causes could similarly mobilize the public on such a scale. This has been termed "[mimetic distortion](#)" by Stéphane Corcuff.

The "China Factor" as the Driving Force of the "Bluebird Movement"

Yet the natural question to ask regarding comparisons between the 2024 Bluebird Movement and the 2014 Sunflower Movement is why there would be such a sense of threat that triggered a series of large-scale mobilizations within a relatively limited timeframe for both movements.

Indeed, the Bluebird Movement had a similar framing as to the perceived sense of threat as with the Sunflower Movement. Part of this was because of the legacy of the preceding movement casting a long shadow over a decade of political discourse, with terms such as "[black box](#)"—referring to the way in which the KMT was seen as circumventing review and oversight mechanisms in the legislature to try and push the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA) that the movement protested into law—having since become ubiquitous as a term in Taiwanese politics.

The "black box," too, came up in the Bluebird Movement. That is the means by which the KMT party caucus, in collaboration with the TPP caucus, circumvented committee review to advance the bill to its second reading, angered the public and was again termed a "black box". Anger over such actions—and outrage that the KMT had again resorted to such means to force through bills ten years after the Sunflower Movement—is part of what led to the mobilization around the protests. It proves somewhat surprising that the KMT would not be conscious of the poor optics in carrying out the same course of action that led to mass protests a decade ago and the potential for this to stir up public blowback.

But the protests were not merely against how the passage of a law was seen as lacking transparency. In other words, the Bluebird Movement protests were not merely against the "black box" means by which the KMT sought to pass the legislative—they were against the contents of such changes as well, which were seen as a pan-Blue power grab. Apart from that, this was seen as a throwback to the KMT actions dating to the authoritarian period; this was seen as reminiscent of—and potentially at the behest of—China.

As with the Sunflower Movement, then, another major undercurrent of the Bluebird Movement demonstrations was that the KMT was seen as acting on behalf of China, in overriding democratic institutions won through many years of struggle. In this way, the Bluebird Movement was also a movement in which the "China factor" played an important role in collective mobilization, as visible in the many references to China's domestic authoritarianism by speakers in the main stages of the protests set up by organizers, and in the many self-initiated open mic sessions that took place throughout the demonstration.

A factor in why the public mobilized in the course of the Sunflower Movement was because [the CSSTA](#) was a trade agreement that the KMT hoped to sign with China would have allowed for

Chinese investment in Taiwan's service sector. As Taiwan's service sector is roughly 65% of its GDP, this would have potentially had large political implications for Taiwan at a time in which the purchase of Taiwanese media outlets by pro-China businessmen such as Tsai Eng-meng had already [prompted fears](#) in past years.

The powers that the KMT aimed to obtain, as resisted by the Bluebird Movement, did not directly have to do with Chinese political influence. However, they would have granted prosecutorial powers normally residing with the executive and judicial branches of government to legislators. Yet the KMT was framed as potentially aiming to create laws in Taiwan similar to national security legislation in Hong Kong, as well as more broadly trampling over democratic institutions in line with past actions during the authoritarian period.

Interestingly enough, the Bluebird Movement protests took place in the same timeframe as [Chinese military exercises](#) directed at Taiwan after the inauguration of Lai Ching-te as president. Yet the Chinese military exercises rarely ever came up in the protests. Even the potential national security dimension of the new powers that the KMT hoped to obtain, in that military officials or government officials in roles related to national security could be forced to divulge secrets—at a time when KMT legislators as [Ma Wen-chun](#) and [Hsu Chiao-hsin](#) already were under fire for leaking confidential documents regarding Taiwan's domestic submarine program or diplomatic negotiations with central European countries—rarely came up.

This points to, then, how the sense of threat that led to mobilization on the scale of either the Sunflower or Bluebird Movements had to do with a sense of threat from China, but one in which the KMT and pan-Blue camp came to stand in as China's domestic proxy. By contrast, actual military threats from China have not led to mass mobilizations in Taiwan.

In this sense, the Bluebird Movement was compared to the Sunflower Movement because both were fundamentally about Taiwan's relationship with China, making them the only movements in the last decade truly comparable in size and scale rather than being solely about domestic issues like government transparency or oversight. Perhaps what this tells us, in evaluating both movements, is that the China factor is still the source of the largest social mobilizations in Taiwan in the past decade, much as it continues to be the largest determinant of electoral politics in Taiwan.

This article was published as part of a special issue on ['Bluebird Movement: Legislative Reform Protests in Taiwan'](#).

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