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53 l'alwans KMT Fractures

With Advent Of Democracy

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TAIPEI-Taiwan has long been a rebuke to mainland China. In Imperial days it was a New World of opportunity for the poor and oppressed of Fujian Province. Under Japanese rule it was a model of good order, education and public works. Since 1949 under the Kuomintang (KMT) it has been the exemplar of industrial development. And now it is accomplishing a transition to an open society with plural politics. Dec. 18 will see the first ever free and fully representative election to the islands Legislative Yuan, or lawmaking body, with 351 candidates competing for 124 constituency seats. Another 30 will be appointed by the parties according to the percentage of total votes gained by each party. The KMT, which controls all the organs of government, is sure to win. But most observers expect the leading opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to pick up 30 percent of the vote. How many seats that would give them is not clear due to the nature of the voting system.

Despite KMT dominance, the elections may lead to less stable politics. The advent of democracy has forced the KMT to democratize itself so that the once monolithic party is fracturing into factions of personality, policies and access to the spoils of power. The factions are not as formalized as those in Japan's Liberal Democratic Party but may become so.

Meanwhile, the DPP, led by once-exiled lawyer Hsu Hsin-liang needs to evolve from an era of heroic battling of KMT oppression to a party eventually capable of government. It is conscious of the need to avoid being condemned by ideology or single issue politics to perpetual opposition like Japan's Socialists.

While the KMT has moved to attract Taiwanese votes, the DPP has also shifted to the center. It responded to public anxiety about its shrill campaign for independence by toning down its rhetoric and emphasizing more mundane issues. Last year the DPP got only 25 percent of the vote in elections for the National Assembly.

The poor performance was attributed to pragmatic fears that such outright secession would lead to the invasion that Beijing has long threatened if Taiwan claims independence. Now the slogan is One China One Taiwan which effectively means the same but less starkly.

Now that the legislature is fully elected, rather than stuffed partly with ancient KMT representative of main-

land provinces, the opposition no longer finds it necessary to take its politics to the streets or disrupt the legislature with boycotts and fist fights. Public rallies remain important for both parties. The rhetoric can be ear' 4', 9

ly and passionate. But where once there were riots and broken heads there are now only speeches. With independence on the back burner, the main opposition issues now are welfare, the environment and money politics. The DPP is not socialist, but it wants more welfare spending and is suspicious of the power of big business. One issue is the financial manipulators who took the stock exchange index from 1,000 to 12,000 and almost back to 3,000 in a few years. Ironically, the biggest manipulator of all, currently appealing a jail sentence, is an independent candidate as well as having some KMT candidates in his pocket.

Vote buying is also an issue. It is a social as well as political problem and in this election may be more important than ever before. Numerous big businessmen are standing, mainly for the KMT and in key electorates the price of votes is high. But it remains hard to estimate how far money affects voting behavior. Many take the money and vote the other way. In rural areas it is more a quasi-feudal phenomenon.

Money politics puts the poor DPP at a disadvantage. So too does the voting system. Constituencies have different numbers of members according to their population. The largest, Taipei County, has 16 seats being fought over by 49 candidates. But each voter has only one vote. This puts a premium on party organizing their faithful to distribute votes in the most effective way among their various candidates. The KMT is still a well oiled machine. The DPP is an organizational shambles.

However, this inbuilt advantage for the KMT is being diluted by the fact that several prominent KMT figures who failed to get party endorsement are standing away. These include former Finance Minister Wang Chien-shen and former Environmental Affairs overlord Jaw Shau-kong, both respected for being clean and competent. They are likely to edge out official candidates and reduce the KMT score for the proportional list. DPP unity is also marred by unofficial candidates. Beijing regards the electoral exercise with deep suspicion, prompting the twin evils of democracy and separatism. The contrast between Taiwan's election and Beijing's hostility to the modest reforms proposed for Hong Kong is stark. Making matters worse is Taiwan's renewed access to modern

arms. Beijing had been confident it was gradually enticing Taiwan toward reunification through cross-strait trade and domestic economic reform. Suddenly it finds that Taiwan's ability to maintain de facto independence has been enhanced by meddling by the old western and Japanese imperialists with their lethal new combination of arms and support for democracy. V. ?hlllp Bowrlng is former editor of the 1r Eastern Economic Review.)