

WHOEVER'S ELECTED PRESIDENT IN 2004, TAIWAN WILL BE THE WINNER

by Don Feder

America isn't the only democracy choosing a president next year. The Taiwanese – whose politics are even more fractured and fascinating than our own– will elect a president on March 20, 2004.

Next year's election will be the latest milestone in Taiwan's political development. At times, it's hard to recall that less than two decades ago, the island was ruled by a military regime. First martial law was ended, then new political parties allowed and media restraints lifted. Octogenarian oligarchs from Mainland China were sent into retirement, and a new legislature democratically elected.

In 1996 came the first direct presidential election. In 2000, the first democratic transfer of power occurred, with Chen Shui-bian's election as president. Leader of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Chen ended the Kuomintang's half-a-century in power on the island.

Today Taiwan stands as a model of popular government and respect for human rights. Its democracy is so vibrant that political change comes at a dizzying pace.

The presidential election of 2000 set the stage for 2004. Four years ago, a split in the Kuomintang (KMT) permitted Chen's election. Lien Chan – vice president under the outgoing Lee Teng-hui – was the KMT's presidential candidate. The younger, charismatic James Soong bolted the party when he wasn't nominated as Lien's running mate.

As the presidential candidate of the new People First Party (PFP), Soong outpolled Lien (36.8% to 23.1%). With the KMT divided, Chen was elected with 39.3 percent of the vote.

The DPP had a reputation as a maverick party – anti-nuclear, pro-independence and eager to accelerate the pace of reform. Nevertheless, Chen made no overt moves toward declaring Taiwan’s independence.

After the election, the KMT split once more. Suspecting that he had connived in Chen’s election, the party expelled Lee – who had served as Taiwan’s president for 12 tumultuous years. Seeming to confirm that judgment, Lee formed the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), which he allied with Chen and the DPP.

In December 2001’s elections, the DPP became the dominant (but not the majority) party in the legislature, followed by the KMT, PFP, TSU and yet another KMT-offshoot, the New Party.

All of that is prelude to 2004. The KMT and PFP, which formed a working alliance in the legislature, are running a joint ticket (Lien for president, Soong for vice president). Lee is still supporting Chen, who’s running behind in the polls.

Chen is trying to position himself as the candidate of both national pride and democratic progress. He’s proposing to give the island a new constitution by 2008 and a law providing for plebiscites on controversial questions (perhaps someday including independence?) as early as next year.

The party’s campaign theme, articulated by Chen in an October 6 interview in The Washington Post, is: “One country on each side” of the Taiwan Strait – as opposed to the mainland’s “one-China” policy. The DPP defended Lee when he went so far as to

declare at a September pro-independence rally – attended by more than 100,000 -- that, “The Republic of China (*the traditional name for the government Chiang Kai-shek moved from the mainland to Taiwan in 1949*) “no longer exists.”

In his campaign rhetoric, Chen seems to imply that the KMT is conniving with Beijing to undermine Taiwan’s sovereignty.

For his part, Lien charges Chen with mismanaging the economy and needlessly antagonizing China. The former vice president promises to improve cross-straits relations by “replacing the hostility caused by the Democratic Progressive Party.”

In reality, the candidates are much closer here than either is willing to admit. Chen also wants improved relations with his giant neighbor and promises to push direct transportation links. Though he says Taiwan’s sovereignty is a reality, in almost four years he has made no move to officially declare the island’s independence.

If Chen is no wild-eyed Taiwanese nationalist, neither is Lien a compliant tool of Beijing. After all, Taiwan’s current drive for international recognition (including the campaign for readmission to the United Nations) began during the KMT’s tenure.

Lien says he wants better relations with the mainland under the so-called “1992 Consensus” – by which non-governmental negotiators for Taipei and Beijing agreed that there is “one China” but left it to each side to interpret what that means.

Whatever way the 2004 election goes, Taiwan will continue to assert its national rights in the international arena while blocking China’s drive for reunification.

At the same time, there are real differences between the parties. KMT is more pro-business and has a reputation for knowing how to govern. DPP, with a stronger base among native Taiwanese, wants to quicken the pace of democratic reform.

In the glare of Taiwan's frequently heated campaign rhetoric, it's easy to lose sight of the on-going miracle of Taiwanese democracy. On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, there are no opposing parties, no conflicting visions and no charismatic leaders locked in electoral combat – just a continuation of the 54-year reign of a communist dictatorship impervious to political change.

Whichever candidate triumphs on March 20, 2004, Taiwan will come out the winner.