



Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Braig, Stefan (2010),
Signs of Change? An Analysis of Taiwan's December 2009 Local Elections, in:
Journal of Current Chinese Affairs, 39, 1, 175-197.
ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
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Published by

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in cooperation with the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia
Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield and Hamburg University Press.

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Signs of Change? An Analysis of Taiwan's December 2009 Local Elections

Stefan Braig

Abstract: Under special circumstances created by a government decision to partly merge and upgrade six counties and county-level cities to special municipality status, local elections took place on December 5, 2009 in areas covering less than half of Taiwan's population. The results are generally seen as an important, though small, victory for the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The ruling Kuomintang (KMT) (Guomindang), however, has remained in a stable position, while the DPP still has a long way to go towards a comeback.

■ Manuscript received January 4, 2010; accepted February 8, 2010

Keywords: Taiwan, Taiwanese local politics, local elections, Taiwanese party politics

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Introduction

On December 5, 2009, Taiwan held its second so-called “three-in-one” elections, in which voters were called on to vote for 1. county magistrates and county-level city mayors; 2. county councillors; and 3. township mayors.¹ In terms of Taiwan’s national politics these elections were significant in that they were the first nationwide, regularly scheduled elections² since the ruling party changed early in 2008 with the election victories of the Kuomintang (KMT) (Guomindang) in the legislative and presidential elections, which saw that party’s candidate, Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu), sworn in as president and the corresponding defeats of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

The 2008 national-level elections themselves had been a very meaningful turn in Taiwan’s still rather young multiparty democracy. In what was then only the second change of ruling party since Taiwan’s democratization began in the late 1980s, power was brought back to the KMT, a party that had governed Taiwan successively for over five decades since 1949 when it found refuge on the island following military defeat at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party on the Chinese mainland. Previously, the opposition DPP, which had been founded in 1986 out of an opposition movement of people “outside the KMT” (党外 *dangwai*), took over the reins of power for the first time in 2000 with the election victory of its presidential candidate, Chen Shui-bian (Chen Shuibian). It was at about this time that the Taiwanese party system became slightly more diversified with the splitting off from the KMT of two small, yet relevant parties. These were then grouped together with the bigger parties in two political camps, the so called “pan-blue” and the “pan-green” camps, according to their position on the fundamental question of Taiwanese politics: whether Taiwan is and should be a part of China and

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- 1 The author wants to thank Dr. Karsten Giese and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.
 - 2 Three legislative by-elections had already been held in single-member election districts in Miaoli (on March 14, 2009: won by independent candidate, Kang Shih-ju (Kang Shiru), with 50.98 per cent of votes against a KMT candidate), Taipei (on March 28, 2009: won by the KMT candidate, Chiang Nai-hsin (Chiang Naixin), with 48.91 per cent against three other candidates), and Yunlin (on September 26, 2009: won by the DPP candidate, Liu Chien-kuo (Liu Jianguo), with 58.81 per cent against two pan-blue candidates), to replace the originally elected legislators who had lost their seats because of vote-buying convictions and regulations regarding foreign citizenship, respectively (CEC 2009a).

should eventually reunite with the mainland, or whether it should preserve its de facto political independence and defend itself against the aggressive claim of sovereignty over Taiwan of the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) and its pressure for reunification of "the motherland". The People First Party (PFP, 亲民党 *qinmindang*), leaning somewhat towards eventual unification and China-friendly policies, came to form the (pan-)blue camp together with the KMT and the New Party (新党 *xindang*), which basically share this political outlook. Holding an opposite, "pro-Taiwanese" position, the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU, 台湾团结联盟 *taiwan tuanjie lianmeng*) forms the (pan-)green camp together with the DPP.³ Since the mid-2000s, however, the political relevance of both smaller parties has declined (cf. below).

Nineteen months into the Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu) presidency, the elections on December 5, 2009 now lent themselves as a yardstick to measure shifts in the major parties' political strengths in terms of public support. Accordingly, part of the Taiwanese media and the opposition DPP hailed these (actually) local government elections as a poll on Ma's presidency and the policies of the KMT government, and urged the electorate to punish both for their mistakes. Taking a closer look at the election results, discontent with the KMT government does seem to have found its expression on December 5, though party politics at the local level and, to a lesser degree, local issues played a role, too.

The Results: Few Surprises and a Minor Victory for the Opposition

The local elections on December 5, 2009 were special in that, unlike the first three-in-one elections in December 2005, they took place in only 17 of Taiwan's 23 counties and county-level cities. Six counties and cities (Taibei County, Taizhong City, Taizhong County, Tainan City, Tainan County, and Gaoxiong County) were not included, following the central government's decision to upgrade and partly merge these regions into special municipalities in 2010 (*China Post* 2009m). Mayoral and council elections in these upgraded areas will be postponed until December 2010 when the citizens of the two existing special municipalities, Taibei City

3 The camps' names are drawn from the bigger parties' flags: the KMT flag is blue and white, and the DPP's flag is green and white.

and Gaoxiong City, are scheduled to cast their ballots in their respective mayoral elections.

Thus, in the December 2009 three-in-one elections, the number of eligible voters at the county level was just over seven million people out of the areas' total population of approximately nine million, representing just under 41 per cent of Taiwan's voting public. They were to elect, firstly, 14 county magistrates (县长 *xianzhang*, also translated as "county commissioners") and three county-level city mayors (市长 *shizhang*), and secondly, a total of 592 county and city councillors. At the township level, due to different regulations, the number of eligible voters totalled only about 6,200,000 and, in the third poll, they were to elect 211 mayors of rural townships (乡 *xiang*), urban townships (镇 *zhen*), and cities (市 *shi*).

The turnout of voters in the first ballot to elect county magistrates and city mayors amounted to 63.34 per cent, while 63.39 per cent voted in the second ballot to elect council members, and 64.11 per cent of eligible voters cast their vote in the third ballot for township mayors. The highest proportion for the third ballot – the lowest level of all three – is to be explained by the smaller number of eligible voters for the township-level poll. Thus, those who went to the polls and cast all three ballots would automatically count for a higher percentage in the township elections.

Table 1: Three-in-one Elections – Posts Won by Party

	Total	KMT	DPP	Other Parties	Independents
County Magistrate and City Mayor Election	17	12	4	0	1
County Councillor Election	592	289	128	5	170
Township Mayor Election	211	121	34	0	6

Source: CEC 2009b.

In the county magistrate and county-level city mayor elections, the KMT took 12 of the 17 county-level posts, while the DPP took four, as shown in Table 1. For the DPP, this can be considered a victory, as it managed to successfully defend all three counties in the south of Taiwan originally under its control, that is Yunlin, Jiayi, and Pingdong counties, and also to take back Yilan from the KMT, which had won this county only four years ago for the first time after 24 years of DPP (*dangwai*) rule there.

Although it won three times as many county-level posts as the DPP, the KMT's victory was somewhat disappointing because it not only lost its seat in Yilan County, but it was also defeated in Hualian County by independent candidate, Fu Kun-chi (Fu Kunqi), who had left the KMT after being denied party-centre nomination for the magistrate race on account of a former criminal record (*China Post* 2009e). The KMT successfully reclaimed the south-eastern county of Taidong, however, which had previously been governed by an independent.

Table 2: Three-in-one Elections – Vote Share by Party (in Per Cent)

	KMT	DPP	Other Parties	Independents
County Magistrate and City Mayor Election	47.87	45.32	0.36	6.44
County Councillor Election	43.94	24.41	0.89	30.76
Township Mayor Election	48.82	20.04	0.27	30.87

Source: CEC 2009b.

A comparison of both parties' overall vote share shows that, in the poll for county-level posts, the DPP trailed the KMT's 47.87 per cent share of the votes by only 2.55 percentage points (Table 2). This constitutes a second element of victory for the DPP, if only symbolically, because it means that, in terms of vote share, the opposition party gained much ground, even in the pan-blue strongholds of northern and central Taiwan, where in most cases it wasn't expected to win outright anyway. Compared to 2005, these increases in the DPP's vote share occurred in Xinzhu City and Taoyuan, Miaoli, Zhanghua, and Nantou counties (Table 3). In Penghu, although its vote share declined slightly, the DPP's candidate lost to his KMT rival by a particularly narrow margin of just 1.29 per cent, or 595 votes. Setbacks were suffered by the DPP only in the pan-blue stronghold of Jilong and on its "own turf" in Jiayi County.

Table 3: Comparison of KMT and DPP Vote Share in 2005 and 2009 by County and City (in Per Cent)

	Jilong	Tao-yuan	XZ City ^{*1}	XZ County ^{*2}	Miaoli	Zhanghua	Nantou	Yunlin
2005	KMT 41.14	DPP 60.84	KMT 69.27	DPP 32.91	KMT 47.91	DPP 40.52	KMT 45.32	DPP 53.37
2009	KMT 55.11	DPP 42.08	KMT 55.63	DPP 30.55	KMT 63.79	DPP 43.63	KMT 50.87	DPP 65.37

	JY C. ^{*3}	JY Co. ^{*4}	Ping-dong	Yilan	Hualian	Taidong	Penghu	Lianjiang
2005	KMT 54.63	DPP 45.37	KMT 41.86	DPP 47.75	KMT 42.66	DPP 19.86	KMT 50.69	DPP 48.16
2009	KMT 52.20	DPP 45.71	KMT 40.67	DPP 59.33	KMT 25.44	DPP 47.41	KMT 49.36	DPP 48.07

Note: ^{*1}: Xinzhu City; ^{*2}: Xinzhu County; ^{*3}: Jiayi City; ^{*4}: Jiayi County.
 Source: CEC 2005 and 2009b.

The KMT increased its vote share, compared to 2005, in Jilong City, and Miaoli (by a dramatic 15.88 per cent), Nantou, and Jiayi counties, as well as in Jinmen and Lianjiang counties. However, it owes these gains not so much to a fundamental re-orientation of significant numbers of voters, but rather to the consolidation of the pan-blue political camp that has taken place since the run-up to the 2008 legislative and presidential elections. This process saw the majority of the PFP remerge with the KMT and greatly reduced political space for independents, who often leant toward the pan-blue camp. For example, in the northern city of Jilong, where the KMT obtained a vote share that was almost 15 per cent higher in 2009 than in 2005, 25.89 per cent of the 2005 ballot had been cast for a PFP candidate. Furthermore, in Miaoli County, the KMT's 2009 vote share was 15.88 per cent up on its 2005 share, however, this can be explained by the fact that, in 2005, four independents gained a joint share of 22.24 per cent, while in 2009 only one independent ran, garnering no more than 2.61 per cent (CEC 2005 and 2009a, b).

The two places where pan-blue consolidation paid off most for the KMT, in terms of vote share, were the two off-shore island counties of Jinmen and Lianjiang (better known as Mazu). In 2005, Lianjiang County had been taken with an absolute majority of votes by the PFP candidate, with an independent politician coming in second. This independent ran in 2009 as the KMT candidate and this time won with 57.19 per cent of the votes. Together with the winners' two party-comrade competitors, the KMT's vote share in Lianjiang added up to 98.8 per cent. Similarly, in 2005, Jinmen County's magistrate seat had been won with an absolute majority of votes by the pan-blue New Party. In 2009, a KMT candidate was nominated and was able to win against two relatively strong independents. Neither the PFP nor the basically marginalized New Party fielded any candidates in the 2009 county magistrate and city mayor elections.

The DPP, for its part, also benefited from similar consolidation in Jilong City, where its vote share jumped from 1.5 per cent (2005) to 42.08 per cent (2009), because the TSU, whose candidate, four years earlier, had gained the largest proportion of pan-green votes, had lost political weight in the interim and did not nominate anyone to stand for election in 2009.

In the county and city councillor elections, the KMT won nearly 44 per cent of votes, while the DPP gained just over 24 per cent. The difference, though huge, is hardly surprising, because the KMT outmatches

its rival in two important aspects: the first is size, which means that it has the manpower to field candidates for a large number of posts; the second is organizational strength, which is particularly important when it comes to taking part in elections under the “single non-transferable vote” (SNTV) system still employed in Taiwan’s county-level representative elections. Under this system, each voter casts one vote for one of several candidates competing for several seats in their election district, and in a constituency with n seats the n candidates with the most votes get elected. “Non-transferable” means that a political party cannot level out uneven vote shares among several candidates from its party.

As a logical consequence, it is important for a party to neither nominate too many candidates nor too few. Too many nominations could lead to a thin spread of party followers’ votes that could lead to some or all of the candidates not being among the n persons with the most votes. If the party nominates too few candidates, then votes from its support base would concentrate on those few, thus limiting the number of party members they might have elected. Furthermore, a successful party must ensure that, during the run-up to the election, votes are distributed evenly among its candidates. This can be achieved by legal and less legal methods (cf. below). Both these strategic imperatives can only be achieved effectively as long as the local party is able to gain as clear a picture as possible of the voting preferences and tendencies of its constituency by being in contact with local people via as many of its party workers and voluntary cadres as possible. The KMT is in a much better position to do this than any other political party in Taiwan because of its larger party apparatus at the local level and its connections to local factions (Bosco 1994; Chu 2001). The advantageous ratio of posts per vote in the KMT’s December 2009 results, compared to that of the DPP, demonstrates this: the KMT’s 44 per cent vote share translated into 49 per cent or 289 of the 592 council seats; while the DPP’s 24 per cent share of votes secured only 22 per cent or 128 of the seats.

A comparison of the county-level representative election results of 2009 with those of 2005 does not yield much valuable insight for analysis of overall party politics due to the difference in total voting area (cf. above). Precisely on account of that difference, however, one thing is worth noting: the DPP’s total vote share was higher in 2009 than in 2005, even though the voting area covered proportionally fewer DPP-dominated districts than in 2005. This suggests that the DPP may have

begun to make gradual inroads once again into the KMT stronghold in the north.

Among the Taiwanese public, the county and city council elections did not garner much attention. The online editions of big newspapers, for example, did not publish any reports or major headlines about the councillor elections. The same was true for the township mayor elections, the aggregate results of which shall at least be noted here: the KMT was favoured more plainly in the township mayor election than in the county councillor election, gaining 48.81 per cent compared to the DPP's 20.04 per cent. The KMT's vote share translated into 57 per cent of available seats.

Preceding Developments

When the KMT won a landslide victory in the local elections of December 2005, increasing the number of counties under its control from nine to 16 out of 23, the DPP – then the ruling party in Taiwan – was mired in a crisis of confidence caused mainly by a series of corruption scandals involving presidential advisors and prominent DPP figures (Schütte and Schucher 2006). This situation was exacerbated a short time later when the DPP's already tarnished image was tainted even further by a much larger corruption scandal involving almost the whole family of the then president, Chen Shui-bian (Chen Shuibian). The party was thrown into its deepest crisis ever. It lost the 2008 legislative election badly, gaining only 27 seats out of 125 against the KMT's absolute majority of 81. It also lost the presidential election, in which it gained 41.55 per cent of votes compared to the KMT's triumphant 58.45 per cent. Once again, the KMT became the ruling party, while the DPP held only seven county-level government posts and the Chen Shui-bian (Chen Shuibian) scandal continued to loom large in the headlines.

Meanwhile, unhindered by legislative control – something that the DPP hardly ever enjoyed, the KMT government under president Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu) set about directing Taiwan's cross-Strait policy on a course of *détente* and rapprochement with Beijing. It quickly opened the “three direct links” (direct transport, direct trade, and direct postal communications) with mainland China, unilaterally proclaimed a “diplomatic truce”, and entered into several rounds of talks between both sides' semi-official bodies for cross-Strait negotiations, that is Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and mainland China's Associa-

tions for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), primarily on economic and technical issues.

For those who favour President Ma, these talks can be seen as a manifestation of the success of his constructive *détente* policies. To somehow counter these political gains by the ruling party, the DPP, as the opposition party, organized large-scale demonstrations by its supporters against a cross-Strait summit meeting between ARATS and SEF chairpersons held in Taipei in November 2008. The demonstrations aimed to protest against a sell-out of Taiwan's interests and sovereignty to the PRC (*China Post* 2008; *Taipei Times* 2008).

Currently at the top of the Ma administration's political agenda is the signing of a quasi-free trade agreement with the PRC, the so-called Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). The government argues that Taiwan's future hinges on such an agreement with China, in light of the importance of the Chinese market and the coming into effect in 2010 of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, as well as ASEAN+3 (China, South Korea, Japan) (*Taipei Times* 2009a). Under the conditions offered by these ASEAN agreements, Southeast and East Asian competitors will enjoy much better access to the Chinese market than Taiwan will, leading possibly to the swift marginalization of the Taiwanese economy without a cross-Strait ECFA.

Criticism from the DPP is targeted mainly at two aspects of Ma Ying-jeou's (Ma Yingjiu) cross-Strait policies. Firstly, with regard to content, Ma is criticised for "selling out Taiwan" by approaching China too fast and too far. For example, it is argued that the ECFA, for which the government is pushing, will do Taiwan more harm than good because it would make the island more vulnerable by increasing its economic dependence on China, and also because it would endanger the economic survival of many of Taiwan's less-competitive small- and medium-sized enterprises (*Taipei Times* 2009a). Behind these purely economic dangers, however, stands the fear that the more Taiwan relies on economic integration with mainland China to secure its future, the more political leverage the PRC gains over Taiwan. Secondly, the manner in which the government is rapidly building the substance of Taiwan-China relations by entering into agreements without adequate public or legislative oversight is also a target of criticism (*Taipei Times* 2009g). Such conduct is doing little to gain government trust.

These criticisms seem to have spread among Taiwan's public and even to the generally pan-blue newspaper, *Zhongguo Shibao* (The China

Times), which published the results of an opinion poll that showed a decline in support for the signing of an ECFA (*Zhongguo Shibao* 2009). This in turn was published on the KMT's official party website (KMT 2009). Thus, debate about the ECFA was a hot topic in Taiwanese politics during several months preceding the local elections and beyond, leading to divided public opinion.

The public image of Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu), his government and the Cabinet led by Premier Liu Chao-shiuan (Liu Zhaoxuan) was more directly influenced by the handling of the aftermath of Typhoon Morakot, which hit eastern and southern Taiwan on August 8, 2009, that is just four months before the local elections. The typhoon brought catastrophic floods and caused the death of over 600 people, with some several hundred killed by one landslide alone that buried a whole village (*Taipei Times* 2009r), leaving thousands homeless and causing severe damage to south Taiwan's mountainous areas, most notably in Pingdong and Gaoxiong counties. In the wake of the storm, the central government came under extreme criticism for not only failing to take quick and effective disaster relief measures in the affected areas, but also for its perceived aloofness towards the people there, for example by turning down offers of international aid and assistance (*China Post* 2009k, 2009l). The pressure from public condemnation of the handling of the situation forced Premier Liu and his whole Cabinet to step down (*China Post* 2009j, 2009i). The then KMT secretary general, Wu Den-yih (Wu Dunyi), was appointed premier and began a Cabinet overhaul. The whole crisis dealt a severe blow to President Ma Ying-jeou's (Ma Yingjiu) reputation and his public approval rates (*Taipei Times* 2009q).

The Campaign Period

The KMT had faced further misfortunes during the run-up to the December 2009 polls. The election of one of its legislators from Yunlin County in early 2008 had been invalidated by his conviction for vote-buying, and the by-election, on September 26, 2009, had been won by the DPP candidate with the active support of DPP chairperson, Tsai Ing-wen (Cai Yingwen). One important factor behind this result haunted the KMT's preparations for the county magistrate and city mayor elections: under the influence of and supported by local factions, ambitious KMT members who failed to gain a party nomination would simply go ahead and announce their candidacy as an independent, thus seriously

endangering the official party candidate's chance of victory by splitting the pan-blue votes. In the Yunlin case, the disposed legislator's father, also an alleged vote-buyer and member of the (until then) influential Chang-faction, Chang Hui-yuan (Zhang Huiyuan), insisted on running against the KMT nominee Chang Ken-hui (Zhang Genhui).

Though even the combined vote share of Chang Hui-yuan (Zhang Huiyuan) and Chang Ken-hui (Zhang Genhui) would not have been sufficient to beat DPP candidate, Liu Chien-kuo (Liu Jianguo), the case seemed to trigger a series of similar KMT rebel candidacies or at least announcements of such candidacies for the county-level elections. In Hualien County, another KMT rebel candidate, Chang Chi-ming (Zhang Zheming), contested the pan-blue vote share alongside the ultimately victorious Fu Kun-chi (Fu Kunqi). In the pan-blue stronghold of Xinzhu County, the acting county council speaker, Chang Bi-chin (Zhang Biqin), could not be deterred by the party centre from running against the KMT nominee, and in Nantou County, one KMT member and one former KMT member announced that they would run for the county chief post as independents against the official KMT candidate. The problem that this pattern of "fissioning" creates for the party is not only the danger of splitting pan-blue support, but also the questionable party image that arises. The rebel candidacies cast a shadow on the KMT's image as a unified party and put into question the party leadership's capacity to control party affairs. Since the influence of local factions came into play in Yunlin, as well as in Xinzhu, the emergence of KMT rebels in those regions called to mind the KMT's continued entanglement with those ill-famed, clientelist groups.

Accordingly, in late November, it was expected that the KMT might lose Xinzhu and Hualien counties (*Taipei Times* 2009h). The top echelons of the KMT proclaimed that they took the Yunlin defeat as a warning of the dangers of disunity (*Taipei Times* 2009p), and the momentum of party campaigners' optimism for the county and city executive races shifted from the KMT to the DPP. The DPP's 2008 presidential candidate, Frank Hsieh (Xie Changting), predicted confidently that the DPP would win seven seats (*Taipei Times* 2009o, 2009j), while Premier Wu Den-yih (Wu Dunyi), who was still KMT general secretary at the time of the candidate nominations, admitted that his party "had little chances of making a clean sweep", but that it could garner a victory if it could defend Nantou and Zhanghua counties in central Taiwan and all of its northern strongholds (*China Post* 2009g; *Taipei Times* 2009j).

In its campaign strategy, the DPP chose to focus voters' attention on national-level politics in order to present the December 5 elections as a poll on Ma Ying-jeou's (Ma Yingjiu) presidency and the KMT government. DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (Cai Yingwen) called on voters to express their anger against what she called an incompetent government (*Taipei Times* 2009o). The DPP campaign drew a picture of precisely such a government by pointing to public dissatisfaction with Taiwan's slow economic recovery, correspondingly high rates of unemployment, the poor disaster relief management of August (cf. above), and the government's consent on easing the import of beef products from the United States of America, which only recently had provoked widespread discontent among the Taiwanese public. Moreover, criticism of the Ma government's China policy was brought up with regard to the planned ECFA, which the DPP actively opposed during the campaign period (*Taipei Times* 2009f). Meanwhile, Tsai Ing-wen (Cai Yingwen) also emphasised the elections' potential significance to the DPP in providing it with the chance to return to local government and to prove itself a capable administrator.

By contrast, the KMT's campaign attempted to portray the party (centre) as being very close to the people by holding several of its weekly Central Standing Committee (CSC) meetings in the counties where the December elections would take place. Also, Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu), who had been acting as party chairperson since October 17, 2009, dedicated much effort to stumping for the party's candidates in their locales. As polls had shown that Yilan County might possibly be retaken by the DPP, campaigning there was especially competitive. Heavyweights from both parties made frequent appearances in the north-eastern county, and Yilan was the place that Ma visited second-most often, behind Xinzhu. The theme of his campaign activity was to appeal for loyalty and party unity, as well as party reform and clean politics (*Taipei Times* 2009k; *China Post* 2009f). In addition, the KMT's campaign style naturally focused more heavily on personalities rather than issues of national politics, since the ruling party had little to boast about in this regard. Well aware of this, Premier Wu Den-yih (Wu Dunyi) tried to counter the DPP's strategy by arguing simply that local elections had nothing to do with national politics (*Taipei Times* 2009k). Local political issues, though playing a role, however, did not seem to have a decisive impact on the results of the county executive elections. A notable exception was Penghu, where candidates took clear positions on the issue of whether or not to establish

casinos to invigorate the archipelago's tourism industry: the KMT camp said it would put the issue to a referendum again; while the DPP candidate said he would not hold a referendum should he be elected. This promise seemed to earn the DPP candidate much popularity with an electorate that had already turned down the casino proposal in a referendum only a few months earlier. This may account for the KMT's extremely narrow margin of victory (cf. above).

Overall, the campaign period saw a few unpleasant, if somewhat unsurprising, phenomena. For instance, the DPP led a "spoiling" campaign against the incumbent Nantou county magistrate, Lee Chao-ching (Li Zhaoqing) of the KMT, who was running for re-election. With support from legislators, the DPP candidate tried to capitalize on Lee's earlier contacts with a local criminal and cast doubt on the reputation of Premier Wu Den-yih (Wu Dunyi), who originates from Nantou and has served as magistrate there (*Taipei Times* 2009n). In Jiayi, both parties tried to smear each others' candidates with allegations of fraud (*Taipei Times* 2009d). In the end, the smear campaigns did not endanger the prospective winner's eventual victory.

Many of the allegations made, for example in Jiayi, pertained to vote-buying, an evil that proved to be quite alive in the December 2009 elections. Vote-buying has plagued Taiwan's elections for many decades, and two types can be distinguished: in the first type, a small sum of money or a small consumer item is given to the voter, and constitutes a gift that is given to express and reinforce an existing relationship between voters and local candidates; the second type is the real purchase of votes that might otherwise not be cast for the respective candidate, and thus result in relatively higher prices (Bosco 1994). This type of targeted vote-buying also serves to amass votes for certain, otherwise-losing, candidates when the necessities of SNTV require this (cf. above).

Vote-buying has been acknowledged as an evil by the Taiwanese public and it is often claimed that it has declined in recent years (cf. e.g. Brown, Moon, and Robinson 1998). The fact that legislators have been removed from office for committing this kind of election fraud in 2008 (cf. above), not only shows that the perpetrators are being dealt with seriously, but also that the phenomenon is still prevalent even at the highest level of election. With regard to the local elections under consideration here, more than 800 cases of vote-buying relating to all three elections were reported, and some instances of election-related violence also occurred, according to the Ministry of Justice (*China Post* 2009h;

Taipei Times 2009m). One week ahead of the elections, the Ministry of the Interior stated that 701 people had been found to be involved in 101 cases of vote-buying between September 1 and November 26, 2009; regarding the violence, the Ministry stated that 39 people had been involved in 27 cases of election-related violence (*Taipei Times* 2009e). Because the majority of vote-buying cases seemed to involve the KMT, the DPP highlighted the problem as a campaign issue in a more rational or systematic manner, as well as quarrelling about it in certain locales. On several occasions top DPP party figures publicly drew attention to the problem and spoke out against the practice (*Taipei Times* 2009o; 2009l).

The Meaning of the December Elections for Taiwanese Politics

Among Taiwan's wider public, the election results were seen as a setback for the ruling KMT and an interim victory for the DPP. Reactions in and from the parties themselves also validated this view. KMT chairperson, President Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu), called the results unsatisfactory and ordered the CSC to provide a review report on the elections (*China Post* 2009e, 2009a). DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (Cai Yingwen) spoke of a "very positive result for the DPP, and an important step toward a comeback" (*Taipei Times* 2009b) and interpreted this by forcefully reemphasizing the core message of her party's campaign strategy, namely that voters had now cast a vote of no-confidence in Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu), his policies and his administration (*Taipei Times* 2009b; *China Post* 2009d).

If one is to give an explanation for the aggregate outcome of the December 5 polls, the things that cost the KMT dearly in terms of support were indeed the public's perception of the Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu)/ KMT government's poor performance and insensitive bearing in dealing with the Morakot disaster, and various controversial policies, of which the decision to lift a partial ban on the import of US beef (cf. above) may have been even more damaging than the issue of the ECFA, since it seemed to come into effect more immediately.⁴ This negative

4 Discontent with the government's decision to resume imports of US beef products ran across party lines. In the aftermath of the elections, the Legislative Yuan passed an amendment to the Food Sanitation Act, on January 5, 2010 to reverse the governments' decision (*Taipei Times* 2010).

public perception most certainly had the effect of dissuading many pan-blue supporters from voting for the KMT, thus allowing DPP vote share to increase in the northern (and other) pan-blue base areas, and probably also brought some swing voters to the DPP. In the end, even KMT party officials conceded that public discontent with the Ma administration had been a factor behind the results (*China Post* 2009a).

For Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu) himself this means a decline in both intra-party authority and public support. That the president and party chairman put most of his campaign efforts into trying to re-elect Yilan magistrate, Lu Kuo-hua (Lü Guohua), to no avail, certainly has a negative impact on his authority and popularity within the KMT (Yang 2009). One influential and outspoken CSC member and legislator, Huang Chao-shun (Huang Zhaoshun), even requested a public apology from Ma and the party centre for the election results, after the KMT legislative caucus had offered its own apology (*Taipei Times* 2009c). A poll conducted and published by the Chinese-language *Lianhe Bao* (United Daily News), showed that the elections had had little positive effect on Ma's approval rating, which one day after the election had improved by less than four points to 33 per cent from its all-time low during the aftermath of the August natural disaster (*Lianhe Bao* 2009).

The same opinion poll also showed that DPP Chairperson Tsai's rating had improved greatly from her all-time low in May 2009 (27 per cent) to a ten per cent lead over Ma, with 43 per cent of those polled saying that they were content with her (*Lianhe Bao* 2009). Tsai Ing-wen (Cai Yingwen) was certainly the person who gained most from the elections. At the beginning of her term in office as DPP chairperson, she was viewed as a transitional candidate because she lacked both political experience and her own support base within the party. Now, she had proved that she was an effective campaigner for the party's candidates, with the DPP victory in Yilan County as the most prominent example after she had spearheaded the DPP's success in the legislative by-election in Yunlin in September 2009. This helped enormously to continue consolidation of her position in the party, a process which had effectively begun with the Yunlin by-election (Lee 2009a). Party heavyweights and political observers already identified a "Tsai Ing-wen line" taking shape (*China Post* 2009b) and the important political magazine *The Journalist* talks of a "New DPP" evolving along the traits of Tsai Ing-wen's (Cai Yingwen) personal character (Lee 2009b).

For the DPP, the consolidation of its leadership and the best ever total vote share in any election since the 2004 presidential election can only produce positive effects. Firstly, it has given the party a significant boost of morale, that cannot be underestimated considering the depth of the crisis from which it had to emerge following the 2008 elections. Secondly, the consolidation of party leadership gives ground for a much-needed renewal-cum-clarification of the party's platform and policy orientation. The December 5 elections are also meaningful for the DPP in that the party as a whole, as well as chairperson Tsai (Cai), have finally walked from the shadow of former president Chen Shui-bian's (Chen Shuibian) corruption scandals and his meddling in party affairs. Considering how great a liability Chen had been for the DPP, even many months after his detention, this fact can hardly be underestimated.

Keeping the DPP's actual strength in perspective, however, it becomes clear that it is still far from posing a real threat to the KMT at the polls on its own merit. The DPP's gains this time were made possible largely by the KMT's mistakes. If the KMT takes this as a warning, which its leadership said it would, and acts upon its promises to improve governance, as well as to reform itself in a manner that is convincing to the public, maybe even aided by a recovering world economy that would spur Taiwan's GDP and employment, then the DPP's chances at the next elections look quite bleak. The KMT's ongoing predominance at a local level, after all, is obvious from the fact that it still holds the majority of county and county-level city, as well as township mayor, posts. And although the December 5 elections laid bare the many problems that the KMT is struggling with (cf. above), the KMT still managed to defend more counties than the DPP might have thought possible. In this sense, not too much has changed in the power balance between green and blue, and one has to agree with former vice-president, Annette Lu (Lü Xiulian) of the DPP, that the elections had their greatest political effect on both parties' chairpersons rather than on the parties as such (*China Post* 2009b).⁵ According to *The Journalist*, this might have an interesting effect

5 Since this means a weakening of Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu) to a certain degree, one might be tempted to speculate about the possibly increased chances of the DPP legislative caucus to exert effective control over the government's manoeuvring towards the planned ECFA. After the elections, the DPP affirmed its claim that what had been essentially voted on was Ma and what he stands for politically, including the ECFA. Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu) himself proclaimed that the election results "served as an alarm for his administration to modify the policies in view of the reduced number of overall ballots won by all KMT candidates" (*China Post* 2009c).

on local politics. With Ma Ying-jeou's (Ma Yingjiu) former aura more or less faded away and Tsai Ing-wen (Cai Yingwen) taking a rather modest and rational approach to politics, both parties' leaderships lack a political star, forcing local politicians to rely solely on their own political achievements and visions when campaigning in future grassroots elections. In that sense, the December 5 elections have produced the positive side effect of re-centring local politics on local affairs (Yang 2009).

Conclusion

The December 2009 three-in-one local elections were – in Taiwan, as well as in this analysis – considered mainly with regard to their significance for party politics above the local level. In Taiwan they aroused much interest as a test of the strength of the ruling and opposition parties, and of the popularity of the president and ruling party chairperson, Ma Ying-jeou (Ma Yingjiu). They did indeed reveal important things about both. As it has been shown, the DPP is actually recovering and on its way to becoming an important player in Taiwan's politics again, while even President Ma himself stated that he had got the message that his administration must improve. An analysis of the elections at this point thus serves to highlight both parties' actual strengths and weaknesses, and this is important in its own right. The elections do not, however, possess validity as a tool for prognosis of the outcome of the 2012 national-level elections, that is the legislative and presidential elections. This is so, not only because of the many surprising turns that often occur in Taiwan's vibrant democracy, but mostly because of the scope of the December 2009 elections. With less than half of the Taiwanese electorate taking part and the voting areas being largely rural, these results can hardly be deemed representative. To gauge the parties' chances in 2012, one would have to wait until December 2010 to add the results of the mayoral elections in the five newly created special municipalities to the picture. These polls will be much closer temporally to the national-level elections and represent over 50 per cent of eligible voters. When combined with the results of the December 2009 three-in-one elections and

Judging from his later statements and the 2010 New Year address, however, the ECFA is still a top priority on his political agenda (*Taipei Times* 2009s; *China Post* 2010), and thus his political future is also tied to the question of whether or not he will be able to popularize this project against widespread concerns about it endangering Taiwan's sovereignty.

political developments since then, they will probably allow for a more refined guess about the prospects for 2012. Moreover, the seven legislative by-elections also taking place in 2010 will ensure that the time we have to wait for the “bigger” picture will not be too long for political observers of Taiwan.

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