

Taiwan's anti-China president wins re-election

By Ben McGrath
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Taiwan re-elected President Tsai Ing-wen to a second, four-year term on Saturday following a campaign in which she focused her attack on Beijing. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lost seats but retained a majority in the legislature, known as the Legislative Yuan. With her victory, Taipei will continue to move closer to the United States as the Trump administration intensifies its war drive against China.

Tsai defeated her main opponent Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu of the Kuomintang (KMT), receiving 8.17 million votes, a record number for a presidential candidate, or 57.13 percent of the total. Han received 5.52 million votes, or 38.61 percent. James Soong of the People First Party got 4.26 percent of the vote. Voter turnout was 74.9 percent.

In being re-elected, Tsai rebounded from her party's heavy losses in the November 2018 local elections. At the time, she was hugely unpopular, garnering only a 24.3 percent approval rating. These factors led to Tsai's token resignation as head of the DPP. Han emerged as a serious challenger to Tsai after winning the mayoral race in Kaohsiung, a DPP stronghold for 20 years.

None of the economic conditions—high youth unemployment, stagnant wages, and a fall in real living standards—that led to Tsai's unpopularity a year ago has been addressed, nor will they be in her second term. Tsai exploited events in Hong Kong in order to whip up an anti-China atmosphere and blame Beijing for conditions in Taiwan. In doing so, Tsai indicated her willingness to collaborate in Washington's war drive in the region while hiding this fact from voters.

Dissatisfaction towards the two main establishment parties still exists. The Taiwan People's Party (TPP), formed last August, picked up five seats in the

Legislative Yuan while the DPP lost seven, bringing its total to 61. The KMT gained three seats, rising to 38 in the 113-seat lawmaking body. Independents and smaller parties took the remaining nine seats.

Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je leads the TPP and is considered a potential presidential contender. He was elected mayor in 2014 as an independent with the backing of the DPP. He won re-election in 2018, but the DPP has distanced itself from Ko as he has tried to strike a more conciliatory approach to Beijing, saying in July 2019 that “the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family.” During a trip to Washington last March, Ko remarked during a speech at the conservative Heritage Foundation that Taiwan should be “clinging to the United States and Japan, while being friendly toward China.”

Bonnie Glaser, a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, tweeted March 22, “As Taipei mayor, [Ko] has not been compelled to present more details. Should he run for president, he will have to fully explain his approach to Beijing and how he plans to strengthen Taiwan's defense.” In other words, to win Washington's support, politicians must demonstrate their unflinching commitment to the US war drive against China.

Tsai, on the other hand, has done just that. She continued to denounce China following her victory. “The results of this election carry an added significance because they have shown that when our sovereignty and democracy are threatened, the Taiwanese people will shout our determination even more loudly back,” she stated.

Washington joined in the chorus of denunciations. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo congratulated Tsai on her re-election and applauded her commitment to the US, saying, “The United States thanks President Tsai

for her leadership in developing a strong partnership with the United States and applauds her commitment to maintaining cross-strait stability in the face of unrelenting pressure [from Beijing].”

It is, however, Washington that has deliberately heightened tensions with China and inflamed flashpoints throughout the region, including Taiwan. In 2011, the Barack Obama administration initiated its “pivot to Asia,” to surround China both economically and militarily, enflaming regional territorial disputes and risking the outbreak of war. Trump has taken this further, launching a trade war against Beijing and challenging the “One China” policy that governs cross-strait relations.

In 2016, shortly before taking office, Trump accepted a phone call from Tsai, congratulating him on his election, the first direct contact between US leaders since 1979. He went on to state a few days later, “I don’t know why we have to be bound by a One China policy.” In 1979, Washington recognized Beijing as the legitimate ruler of all China, including Taiwan and ended diplomatic relations with Taipei.

In collaboration with Tsai’s government, Trump has signed the Taiwan Travel Act to facilitate high-level exchanges between US and Taiwanese officials, and overseen the sale of billions of dollars’ worth of fighter jets, tanks, and stinger missiles to Taipei. Last June, in its “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report,” the US Defense Department labelled Taiwan a “country,” implicitly challenging the One China policy.

Beijing has stated that it will use force to retake Taiwan if Taipei or Washington violates the One China policy. China will not allow the US military to gain a strategic foothold on Taiwan, particularly in the face of Washington’s threats. Tsai has placed Taiwan on the frontline of this growing conflict, entirely behind the backs of the Taiwanese people. Furthermore, with support from Washington, Tsai will feel emboldened to further push against the One China policy and could even declare Taiwanese independence.

A war between China and the United States would be a complete disaster for Taiwanese workers and youth, who will be forced to fight a disastrous conflict manufactured in Washington to subordinate China to its interests. Such a war would easily escalate into a nuclear conflagration.

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