Summary of Yun-han Chu Seminar
"How To Size Up Taiwan's 2012 Election"
March 14th, 2012

The Democracy in Taiwan Project was pleased to welcome Yun-han Chu from Academia Sinica on March 14th. His presentation, "How To Size Up Taiwan's 2012 Election," discussed the outcomes and implications of the recent presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan.

Professor Chu began by characterizing 2012 as a "year of power transition" internationally, with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in March and Barack Obama's upcoming re-election bid, but also for East Asia in particular with the power succession in Pyongyang, the transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in the PRC, the upcoming December presidential contest in South Korea, and so on. The outcomes of these political junctures, Chu contends, "carry enormous implications for the region's stability and prosperity," and Taiwan's recent elections ought certainly to be included in such analyses.

Much was at stake for the US in this contest, considering that its relations with Beijing are already contentious on several fronts, and further because a flare-up in tensions across the Taiwan Strait could cause difficulties for the Obama administration in this election year. The PRC had an even greater stake in the contest, especially insofar as a return to DPP rule could have threatened Hu Jintao's recent pragmatic approach to "peace and development" rather than "peaceful reunification." Chu also suggested that a loss for Ma could have symbolized the Taiwan people's rejection of the 1992 Consensus on "one China."

Simultaneously, this event marked a strong milestone in Taiwan's democratic consolidation, being the 5th popular election of the president and the 7th popular election of the national legislature. Competitive democracy and power rotations have normalized while partisanship has crystallized. Chu also noted that these elections represent an important return to confidence in the democratic system after political gridlock and conflict between 2000 and 2008. This year voter turnout was 74.4%, still quite high but continuing its gradual declining trend as the democracy comes of age, and signs of over-mobilizing have dissipated.

Professor Chu discussed a significant waning of the "national identity cleavage." Importantly, this was the first national race where the Taiwan independence issue was not a prominent factor, as the DPP restrained full-on criticisms of the state structure or the ROC constitution and didn't (as before) make moves to tie a referendum to the presidential race. Overall, the election was more civil than in years past and political polarization was milder. Interestingly, the election was closely followed over the Internet by mainland Chinese, who were amazed by the orderly nature of the contest. Aspirations towards "Taiwan independence" were replaced by fears of being assimilated by China, fears which Ma's "three Nos" pledge helped to assuage.

Chu identified three primary issues defining the race: cross-Strait relations; integrity, capability, and experience of the leadership; and economic challenges. Addressing the outcomes, it seems that "the electorate found no reason to replace an incumbent with a proven track record with someone of unknown quality," and 51.6% of the voters stuck with Ma. As regards the DPP, several factors were at play. Chu characterized the DPP's adjustments to its China policy as too vague to convince independent voters and too timid to galvanize traditional supporters. Simultaneously, there was little observed coattail effect in voting patterns, while the socio-economic equality issue pushed by the DPP did not give them a decisive edge. In the end, opposition candidate Tsai Ing-wen only managed to recover the
DPP's prior electoral strength with 45.6% of the vote.

Ma's margin surpassed expectations, Chu explained, because the perceived closeness of the race compelled many reluctant or lukewarm independent, pan-Blue, and James Soong supporters to vote for Ma, and in general the turnout rate in pan-Blue strongholds was higher than in pan-Green areas. The election originally appeared too close to call, but there were issues with polling reliability and predictions being influenced by an outdated view that polls tend to under-estimate the DPP candidate's real electoral strength, and the perception of closeness in the race was beneficial for both sides to maintain.

Regarding the impacts of the election, Professor Chu argued that this election "consolidates the political coalition behind the KMT policy of cross-Strait political conciliation and economic cooperation," while strengthening the legitimacy of the “1992 Consensus.” Chu described the de jure independence agenda as being overshadowed by a pragmatic debate over how to maximize the gains and minimize the costs and risks of cross-Strait economic integration and economic globalization.

Ma's convincing win indicates fewer political obstacles to cross-Strait economic integration, and Ma's administration will be more confident in pursuing its strategy of harvesting the dividends of peace by trade negotiations, cultural exchange, tourism, and so on. The election serves as a wake-up call for the DPP to revisit its strategies to "catch up with the new reality of a rising China."

Cross-Strait issues Ma is likely to address in the near future include post-ECFA trade negotiations, establishing semi-official liaison offices on each side, signing a cultural and education cooperation accord, expanding cooperation in the joint development of sunrise industries, and initiating second-track dialogues over political issues and international space. At the same time, he will likely not pursue coordination with Beijing’s move over South China Sea, issues with cross-Strait security and military CBMs, peace accord negotiations, or a stronger commitment to One-China Principle beyond the 1992 Consensus. On Beijing's part, they understand it would only be counter-productive to push for political talks before a great majority of Taiwanese voters are really ready, and over the next four years they are likely to push for phasing out US arms sales to Taiwan, increased ties with Taiwan’s local elites and grassroots NGOs, and for the DPP to drop its pro-independence platform.

Professor Chu contended that this election represents the consolidation of a two-party system, as the KMT and DPP have both consolidated their dominance in their respective camps and squeezed out minor allies. The DPP retained electoral strength, but it still needs major adjustments to construct an ultimately winning political platform. The position of the minor parties has become precarious, as neither controls critical swing votes in the Legislative Yuan. Chu predicted, "Neither the TSU or the PFP will be able to outlive the political longevity of their respective charismatic founders."

Concluding by addressing the challenges ahead, Professor Chu pointed out that Ma's domestic policy agenda will be his key focus in his second term, including overcoming domestic resistance to economic openness, speeding up FTA negotiations with major trading partners, and preparing Taiwan for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Other issues at hand include restructuring the economy to diversify exports, coping with worrisome demographic trends, providing opportunities for young people, and addressing some of the issues of socio-economic equality raised on the campaign trail.