

# [***Who is Lai Ching-te, Taiwan's new President?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B3J-HY91-JBSS-S00W-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Lai Ching-te, a former doctor from a poor mining family, was propelled into ***politics*** by a military crisis in the Taiwan Strait 27 years ago.

Now, the soft-spoken political veteran is tasked with preventing another one from happening as the newly elected leader of the self-ruled island that China's Communist Party has vowed to one day absorb.

On Saturday, Lai, 64, the current vice president from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), [*won a widely watched election*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/13/asia/taiwan-presidential-election-results-intl-hnk/index.html) to become Taiwan's next president.

His victory handed the DPP a historic third consecutive term, delivering a snub to [*years of growing threats*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/12/asia/taiwan-election-stakes-china-response-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html) from Taiwan's much-larger authoritarian neighbor, China.

"The election has shown the world the commitment of the Taiwanese people to democracy, which I hope China can understand," Lai told thousands of jubilant supporters at a rally after his win.

Lai, who has long faced Beijing's wrath for championing Taiwan's sovereignty, said as president he has "an important responsibility to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," pledging to pursue dialogue with China under the principles of dignity and parity.

"At the same time, we're also determined to safeguard Taiwan from continuing threats and intimidation from China," he told reporters ahead of his victory speech.

Under leader Xi Jinping, China's most assertive leader in a generation, Beijing has ramped up diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Taiwan, which it views as its own territory to be seized by force if necessary.

Tensions across the Taiwan Strait are at their highest since 1996, when China fired missiles into waters off Taiwan's coast to intimidate voters ahead of the island's first free presidential election - after the nascent democracy emerged from decades of its own authoritarian rule.

For Lai, then a fresh-faced doctor at a university hospital in the southern city of Tainan, that missile crisis became his "[*defining moment.*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/my-plan-to-preserve-peace-between-china-and-taiwan-candidate-election-race-war-7046ee00)"

"I decided I had a duty to participate in Taiwan's democracy and help protect this fledgling experiment from those who wished it harm," he [*wrote*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/my-plan-to-preserve-peace-between-china-and-taiwan-candidate-election-race-war-7046ee00) in The Wall Street Journal last year.

Lai hung up his white coat to run for office - first becoming a legislator, then a popular two-term mayor of Tainan, before serving as the premier and - since 2020 - the vice president of incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen.

The doctor-turned politician has now broken the "eight-year curse" of Taiwan ***politics*** - a popular term nodding to the fact that, until Lai's victory, no political party had ever stayed in power for more than two terms since Taiwan became a democracy.

'Unexpected journey'

Lai called his foray into ***politics*** an "unexpected journey."

Growing up in poverty in a mining village near the northern coast of Taiwan, Lai had dreamed of becoming a doctor [*since childhood*](https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/202306080346.aspx). He had five siblings, and his mother raised them alone by doing odd jobs. His father, a coal miner, died in a work accident when Lai was a small child.

Lai was too young to remember his father. "But one day I suddenly realized, the biggest asset my father left me was that my family was poor," he said at an event in March last year.

"Growing up in such a family, we will be more mature, have more willpower, and have more courage to overcome difficulties."

After completing a bachelor's degree in physical medicine and rehabilitation in Taipei, Lai went to Tainan for medical school.

He was a few years into a promising career as a physician in Tainan when a local DPP official approached him. He asked the popular doctor to help a DPP politician campaign for local elections.

It was 1994, less than a decade after the DPP first emerged from Taiwan's democracy movement against the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang (KMT).

Before lifting martial law in 1987 and transitioning slowly toward free elections, the KMT ruled Taiwan with an iron fist for nearly four decades after fleeing to the island from mainland China after losing the civil war to the Communist forces there.

Tens of thousands of political opponents were killed or jailed during what came to be known as the "White Terror" and the DPP was formed by many veterans of those who had campaigned for democracy.

While Lai was in college in Taipei, he and his roommates had closely followed news of the KMT's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protesters. "I was full of doubts and concerns for the future of this country," he said in [*video*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDBlIC8SbtA&t=225s&ab_channel=%E8%B3%B4%E6%B8%85%E5%BE%B7) released by his presidential election campaign.

Lai agreed to help the DPP with the local election, but the candidate lost in the end.

A year later, some democracy activists invited Lai to join the DPP to run for the legislature.

He initially rejected the idea. "I was born and raised in a rural, impoverished place, and I had always wanted to be a doctor. Now, I've finally made it this far to become a chief physician," he said in the campaign video.

But his political friends refused to give up. Months later, crisis flared in the Taiwan Strait as China held live-fire exercises and fired missiles toward Taiwan, giving Lai a final push across the line.

"Instead of criticizing the ruling government at the time from my clinic, wouldn't it be better to come out and follow the vanguards of the democratic movement and actually do something for Taiwan?" he said in the video.

"I also thought that in this life, if I could find a project that makes me feel passionate to embark on, it would be a life worth living."

'Chill out'

In the lead-up to the election, China made no secret of its desire to prevent a Lai victory.

Chinese officials repeatedly framed the vote as a choice between "peace and war" - echoing a talking point of the KMT's Hou Yu-ih, Beijing's preferred candidate - while railing against Lai for triggering "cross-strait confrontation and conflict."

Hailing from a more radical wing of the DPP, Lai was once an open supporter of Taiwan independence - a red line for Beijing.

His views tempered as he rose through the ranks. But China never forgave him for his comments from six years ago, in which he described himself as a "practical worker for Taiwan independence."

Lai now says he favors the current status quo, proclaiming that "Taiwan is already an independent sovereign country" so there is "no plan or need" to declare independence.

That deliberately nuanced stance mimics his outgoing predecessor Tsai, Taiwan's first female president, who was unable to stand again because of term limits.

Beijing cut off official communications with Taipei after Tsai took office in 2016 and ramped up its campaign to isolate Taiwan internationally, something that looks set to continue when Lai is inaugurated and fully takes over in May.

In many ways Beijing's rhetoric towards Lai is even more hostile than how it viewed Tsai.

China's government and state media regularly rebuke Lai, calling him a dangerous separatist, "troublemaker" and "war maker," while rejecting his repeated offers for talks.

One such offer was made to China's top leader, Xi.

In May last year, at a quick-fire Q&A session with students at his alma mater, National Taiwan University, Lai named Xi as the head of state he would most like to have dinner with.

If he had a chance to dine with Xi, Lai said, he would advise the Chinese leader to "chill out a little."

"No need to be so stressed," he said.

Asked about Lai's invitation, Beijing said his comments were "weird" and accused Lai of "trying to put on the cloak of goodwill" given that his "Taiwan independence nature" had not changed.

Lai's running mate Hsiao Bi-khim, who was elected vice president Saturday, was also openly loathed by Beijing. Hsiao, who recently served as Taiwan's top envoy to the United States, was sanctioned twice by China for being a "diehard secessionist."

'Mainstream public opinion'

Lai earned more than 40 percent of the popular vote, while the KMT scooped up 33 percent and a newer opposition party, the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), racked up 26 percent.

The DPP lost its majority in the legislature, taking 51 of the 113 seats, meaning Lai may find himself more constrained than Tsai and needing to rely on political alliances to pass legislation.

Hours after Lai declared victory, China dismissed the outcome of Taiwan's elections, saying the DPP "does not represent mainstream public opinion" on the island.

"Taiwan is China's Taiwan," China's Taiwan Affairs Office said in a statement on Saturday night.

"This election cannot change the shared hope from compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to get closer and closer, it moreover cannot stop the inevitable destiny that our motherland will be united."

But that assertion could not be further from Taiwan's mainstream public opinion.

Under Xi's strongarm tactics, Taiwan's public has shifted determinedly away from China. Less than 10 percent now support an immediate or eventual unification, and less than 3 percent identify primarily as Chinese.

The majority of Taiwanese want to maintain the current status quo and show no desire to be ruled by Beijing.

"We have been bullied for years on end. I just can't stand kneeling down to their demands and their meddling with our elections. We want to keep our free style of living and our democracy," Yang Wei-ting, a 27-year-old civil servant, said amid cheers and celebrations at Lai's rally.

"I think the most important part for us is to work with like-minded partners around the globe, and tell China that we're not alone and we're not scared. We're standing in the face of an authoritarian regime, but we're backed by many like-minded countries."

CNN's Wayne Chang and Eric Cheung contributed reporting.

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