

An Island of Inspiration: Taiwan's Political Resilience and Growth

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Taiwan, a small island nation in East Asia and a worldwide manufacturing superpower, has undergone significant political changes over the past century. Today, Taiwan is renowned for its liberal government and the abundance of rights and liberties of its citizens. According to FreedomHouse, an organization measuring national freedom, Taiwan scores 94/100, which is one of the highest rankings in the world (FreedomHouse.org). For comparison, the United States, a republic that emphasizes personal rights and liberty, scores at only 83/100. However, this was not always the case – just 40 years ago, Taiwan ruled through a violence-exerting authoritarian regime that has been compared to Nazi Germany (Hartnett et al). Having endured several turbulent periods of struggle during the 20th century, Taiwan evolved from a fascist government that terrorized and massacred its citizens into one of Asia's accomplished leading democracies. Naturally, this raises the question – what factors were most responsible for Taiwan's political changes over the past century?

Historical Contextualization

Following the Japanese surrender in World War II, the Republic of China (the Taiwanese government) formed in 1912 on the Chinese mainland and took over the island in 1947. The new Kuomintang (KMT) government of Taiwan violently suppressed revolts led by local citizens responding to their corrupt leadership. A three-month massacre by the KMT ensued; known as the February 28 incident, more than 20,000 individuals were executed (Shattuck). What followed were 38 years of martial law, known as the White Terror, in which civilians were accused, persecuted, and executed for opposing the KMT. With citizens' basic human and privacy rights disregarded, free speech suppressed, and local cultures and languages expurgated, more than

3,000 were executed and 140,000 imprisoned when martial law finally lifted in 1987 (Huang).

However, Taiwan dramatically evolved into a representative democracy focused on the rights of the people by the 21st century. What gave way to this? Primarily, the measures and the resilience, hardiness, and adaptability taken by the Taiwanese in retort to their authoritarian regime, such as the rising calls for government reform and independence, resulted in immense political developments throughout both the government and society. Although some may claim that the overly resilient Taiwanese led to unnecessary consequences, ultimately, the persistence of their actions contributed the greatest in shaping the political changes in Taiwan over the past century.

Pre-Kuomintang Rule in Taiwan

The political situation in Taiwan has been historically complex, with a turbulent past and ongoing changes over the past century. The push for freedom began before the Kuomintang, during Japanese rule between 1895 and 1945. The rising Japanese government used its powerful military to imperialize and rule over the island and brutality to squash initial anti-Japanese resistance. Andreas Fulda, an expert on Chinese-European relations, wrote while violent protests were practically unseen after 1915, the suppressed Taiwanese, still under the Japanese administration, began “lobbying for equal participation in the fields of politics and economics” as a modernization opportunity (Fulda). While it is important to note that the Japanese and the KMT regimes likely treated the locals differently, Fulda implies that the call for liberation and change had already begun several decades before the takeover of the KMT. The ideology of embracing political modification during Japanese rule invigorated the people to take action. This reveals the citizens’ discontentment with the status quo of Taiwanese politics at that time and the

active pursuance of self-governance, aligning with the global trend of increasing political freedom during the 20th century, like the South African apartheid movement.

Kuomintang Rule

Following the Japanese colonial period, Taiwan was occupied by the Nationalist government of China, or the Kuomintang, which, although dubbing themselves a “democracy”, imposed martial law and an authoritarian one-party system from 1945 to 1987. Jeffrey Maclay, a political scientist, asserts that while some elections and voting were allowed for local issues, ultimately, the Taiwanese had little voice in national decisions. Furthermore, he adds an additional limitation, the National Security Council, which operated like secret police, resorted to the threat of arrest/executions, and commonly invaded the privacy of the people through wiretapping and surveillance (Maclay). These actions likely pressured Taiwanese citizens to accept and tolerate the KMT in fear of the consequences if they spoke out otherwise. Consequently, resentment against the KMT continued to build, resembling their previous reactions to Japanese rule. Therefore, Maclay’s research correlates with Fulda’s, as the common theme of the political oppression of the Taiwanese by both governments is evident. The two authors justify the Taiwanese actions toward political change, as they the grievances the citizens endured and how their sentiments were affected.

Actions, Resilience & Impacts

Despite constant oppression, the Taiwanese continued to press for change. Prominent activists, such as Chen Shui-bian, the eventual first elected Taiwanese president, led the push for

human rights; consequently, demands and efforts for political change skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s. The Tangwai (“outside the KMT party”) Movement, formed to build new political consciousness and nationalism, created a formidable anti-KMT political force through the citizens. According to C. L. Chiou, who wrote a paper for an Asian Studies Conference in Australia, the technically illegal Tangwai Party, originally composed of 101 intellectuals, soon gained traction with many citizens and won about 30% of popular votes for local and provincial elections in 1976 (Chiou). This was noteworthy as it marked the first time that the KMT was publicly politically challenged in the 20 years it had ruled. Voting for the Tangwai and violently protesting were just two of the many ways that the Taiwanese began to take action. Other resisting actions by the people included purchasing over 100,000 propaganda magazines by the Tangwai, which promoted democracy, and plotting organized demonstrations that violated public ordinance laws (Feng). Feng implies that the KMT inevitably and steadily lost political support over the 1970–1980s as more persistent calls and acts for freedom began to prevail.

The new publicity and popularity of the Tangwai Party sparked rallies and demonstrations, which became more frequent. Expectedly, the government responded with violence and repression. On December 10, 1979, the discontentment snowballed and escalated when tens of thousands of people attempted to assemble peacefully in Kaohsiung, a southern city, before police forces attacked the crowd and arrested over 150 citizens. Known as the Kaohsiung or the Formosa Incident, part of the arrested were 8 known leaders of the democracy movement, who were later tortured, interrogated, and sentenced to 12 years to life in prison (Roy). By enduring KMT abuse, these leaders expressed solidity and action even in the face of fear and punishment, further weakening the already fragile political climate. The *Kaohsiung*

Tapes, a book dedicated to preserving Taiwanese history, records the testimonies of several of the Kaohsiung leaders that survived prison. Lin Yi-Hsiung, a member of the Tangwai party, recalled that the interrogators would continuously hit him if they were not satisfied with his responses; thus, he suffered continuous beatings for 10 days (Taiwandc 54). Here, Lin exhibits his courage and his willingness to endure hardship for goals that are important to him. Testimonies from Lin and others in conjunction with the actions of the people that led to civil disobedience and arrests display the commendable resilience possessed by the population to create political change.

Through a larger global lens, this democratic movement appears strikingly similar to other movements for freedom around the world at this time, such as the South African apartheid movement. The majority of the South African population began to protest the minority white government that set in place harsh segregation and discrimination practices against the black locals. Led by Nelson Mandela, the eventual winner of a Nobel Peace Prize, peaceful civil disobedience and later mostly violent demonstrations broke out all throughout South Africa as rebels and normal citizens armed themselves against the national police and fought. Similarly to the Kaohsiung Incident, the leaders, including Mandela, were eventually arrested, tried, and given life imprisonment sentences (Department of State). This shows a similarity in the hostile political states of both nations and how resilience was critical for change. Likewise, both the leaders of both Taiwan and South Africa did not give up, and endured throughout their prison sentences. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela writes about his and his peers' relentless resilience in prison: "Prison is designed to break one's spirit and destroy one's resolve... [But] together our determination was reinforced... Whatever we knew... we shared, and by sharing we multiplied whatever courage we had individually" (Mandela). Mandela's

writing portrayed the faith and confidence that the natural leaders of both South Africa and Taiwan exhibited, as well as the leaders' hardy and resilient actions that kept their hopes up. Although there were differences in society and discrimination culture between South Africa and Taiwan, Mandela's experience was similar to the Taiwanese leaders' through the fact that both leaders and citizens suffered and were imprisoned at the hands of their respective governments for attempting to initiate political change and invigorating their people toward rebellious actions.

“Pitfalls” of Resilience

One can argue that the Taiwanese' resilience led to unnecessary consequences, struggles, violence, and death. For instance, Chamorro-Premuzic and Lusk, two writers for Harvard Business Review magazine, argue that excess resilience can impede leadership, organizational, and team effectiveness, citing statistics that show that overly resilient people become tolerant of adversity and struggle (Chamorro-Premuzic & Lusk). While this was probably an opinion article, under this presumption, one can imply that increasing resilience would decrease the efficiency of people's actions in making differences. However, Taiwanese resilience, violence, and even death were critical for political change; the people's willingness to protest and speak up against the KMT was *because* of the built-up intolerance of their lack of freedom. Specifically, in his book, *The Spirit of Democracy*, Larry Diamond, a Ph.D. in sociology at Stanford and an expert on democracy, implied that certain insufferable conditions triggered the calls for change for several countries. He states that, without the people, who became more democratically conscious due to the “heavily constrained” rigged elections (especially in Taiwan, Senegal, Mexico, and Kenya) that provided them with little to no say, these populations would not have become more “politically active and demanding, forced regimes to be more accountable and responsive... and

enhanced the inclination to defend citizen rights” (Diamond 103–104). While each country presumably had its own political struggles, Diamond provides several examples of how countries began to similarly demand democracy and increase their actions in response to the stimuli of adversity, and therefore disagrees with Premuzic and Lusk’s claim of excess tolerance. One past occasion, mentioned by C. L. Chiou earlier supports Diamond’s argument: after the KMT was caught rigging the Zhongli provincial elections in 1977, the locals rioted, leading to the deaths of at least one individual and resulting in the burning of the local police station (Fang & Chen). Once more, the perseverance and proactive measures taken by the Taiwanese community serve as evidence of their participation in shaping their government's political landscape.

Additionally, Taiwan's anti-KMT leadership gained popularity as calls for democracy increased, contributing to the organization and augmenting the effectiveness of the Kaohsiung Incident as it attracted worldwide attention. Specifically, Stefan Flischauer, a Ph.D. at the University of Tübingen, writes that only 3 days after the Kaohsiung Incident, 10 Taiwanese independence groups in the USA issued a statement that declared their objective of fighting the KMT until the end (Fleischauer). Hence, Flischauer’s remarks correlate with Diamond’s claim of intolerance leading to citizen action, and work to disprove Premuzic and Lusk’s argument again, by proclaiming that the actions and the resilience of the Taiwanese in initiating the Kaohsiung Incident truly publicized their struggle for political change to the rest of the world.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the evolution of the Taiwan political system was undoubtedly due to the actions and resilience of the Taiwanese people, which paid off and resulted in the abolishment of

the authoritarian government in 1987. Commencing a chain of democratic and cultural reforms, in a process called “Taiwanization”, the new government worked with the people to focus on restoring and re-educating local culture and languages, such as Hakka, establishing a plethora of human rights, like LGBTQ laws, and developing nationalism away from the Chinese mainland (Makeham & Hsiau). The Taiwanese people's resilience, determination, activism, and the global community's support were instrumental in pressuring the government to transform, as they fought for their freedoms despite facing repression and violence.

Yet, there are some limitations to exactly just how much influence the people have. For example, most countries in the United Nations still currently do not recognize Taiwan as an official country; therefore, its influence on the global scale is limited (Winkler). Another constraint is its fragmented relationship with China, which pressures its political relations with other countries, such as the US. Nevertheless, there are promising implications regarding Taiwan's successful people-led government transition. In light of the Taiwanese democratization process it is clear that, with resilience, determination, and initiative by the people, it is possible to alter even the structure of an entire nation. This offers hope for our humanity, as it demonstrates that we all have the resilience and capacity to create change to benefit both the present and the future.

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