

Reflections on election day 2014

November 23, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Here I sit, 12 hours to go before Taiwan Election Day 2014. If I make print as I hope, you are reading these words with, as the newscasters say, “the results now all in.” On the eve of the election, I am weighing the situation, trying to be brave as I share a few impressions about what has happened here these recent days. First of all, we are glad it has ended. All the ballyhoo, the accusations, the denials, the countless games of “gotcha, ha ha,” the threats of lawsuits, the hurling of epithets, the videos riddled with scare tactics and non sequiturs: the whole mess is finally over and done with. For this, we utter a heartfelt “Thank you, heaven above.”

Yes, the people of Taiwan have spoken. For approximately 12 months, we’ll enjoy a semblance of peace and quiet. Then the great wheels of politics will again begin their slow, inexorable churn before they quicken and fly into a frenzied whirl for The Really Big Show, the presidential election of 2016. This does not mean, however, that we’re in for dry, dull stories in the media. The outcome of key mayoral contests and supporting but less visible victories around them guarantees a steady supply of noise in the months ahead.

The second thing on my mind is that Taiwan Election Day 2014 was a day of thanksgiving for all of us, or should have been, regardless of party affiliation, candidate preference, and all that nonsense. I tell you, I can hardly restrain myself from asking my students from “the mainland” (I prefer the term “China,” actually) for a reaction to what has just happened here in this country (that’s right, not “on this island”). These students and their loved ones over there cannot of course do what millions of Taiwanese have just done here. All of us ought to be grateful.

More than 11,000 positions of leadership were open to the public for decisions in Election 2014. I told friends in the USA that Taiwan was voting for everything from dogcatchers to garbage men, only a slight exaggeration. Local elections “up the kazoo” was our story. A truly decisive showing across the map by one of the major parties could cause political tremors.

Despite the excessive amount of vitriol that flew through the air, particularly up north in the Taipei

mayoral campaign (but the race for mayor of Kaohsiung sometimes wasn’t far behind on that score), and despite reports of investigations nationwide of over 11, 000 people allegedly involved in campaign irregularities (CP 11-28-14, p. 16), a mountain of campaigns made it to finish lines. Taiwan is the story of a people determining, however clumsily, their collective future together from the ground up. These races did not always happen cleanly or in picture-perfect fashion, and they may have left us “weary to the bone,” as the Paul Simon song puts it. Let it be said, however, that Taiwan is a country of survivors. We can be proud we belong to a land where the people do the choosing, and the weightiest of decisions are not dropped down upon us from one type of an emperor or the other.

Unlike other people who have a brain, I must have a fruitcake between my ears. Given the topsyturvy nature of politics Taiwanese style, only a fellow with a fruitcake in his head would be willing to offer a prediction or two. I’ll take the risk of making a fool of myself, the better perhaps to procure a story upon which to reminisce one day.

Common political sense says it is grotesquely difficult for an independent candidate with next to no political experience to defeat an opponent who happens to sport a famous name, and represents a well-financed, well-organized, and powerful party apparatus like the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). If Ko Wen-je is the mayor-elect of Taipei as you read these words, it could only have happened because of a truly massive voter turnout on his behalf and, we must say, a well of disappointment in Ma Ying-jeou. The election is too close to call, but many are tired of the old and eager for Something Fresh. In this case, Fresh is not flawless. But it might be better than yesterday’s song.

In Kaohsiung, I can’t imagine Yang Chiu-hsing of the KMT trouncing Chen Chu. It may or may not happen, but I could see Jason Hu surviving in Taichung, but only by a whisper. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department of Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This week's column discusses the 9 in 1 election day for Taiwan last Saturday. The writer is obviously a foreigner, and not a local person in the usual sense of the term. Do you feel a foreigner should talk about politics in Taiwan? How do you think your parents might feel on this Q? Do you have friends or relatives in the United States or other countries who may also want to express political views? Should they speak up or stay silent?
2. The column raises the Q of "dirty campaign techniques" in general. How aware are you of "dirty tricks" also in elections in other countries?
3. Some commentators are saying a big reason the new mayor of Taipei was elected was because many young voters are tired of the established political parties and want to try out an "independent" candidate. What is your opinion about this?

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