

# Taiwan: Setback for pro-independence party

Wednesday 23 January 2008, by [CHENG Eva](#) (Date first published: 18 January 2008).

**The chance of President Chen Shui-bian's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) holding on to its ruling party position in the March 22 presidential poll is in serious doubt after his party suffered a major defeat in the January 12 parliamentary election.**

The recent election was the first since Taiwan changed its system from having each electorate represented by multiple seats to one based on a single seat only. This slashed the number of parliamentary seats from 225 to 113, disadvantaging minor parties while favouring powerful local interests.

In the 2001 and 2004 parliamentary polls, the two elections since Chen won the presidency in 2000, DPP and its "pan-Green" allies managed to secure 100 and 101 seats respectively in the 225-seat parliament while opposition Kuomintang (KMT) and its "pan-Blue" allies won a slim majority of 115 and 114 seats.

In the January 12 poll, the DPP won only 27 seats in the 113-seat parliament while the KMT secured a landslide 81 seats. Shortly before the poll, Chen expected his party to win about 50 seats.

The results give the KMT 72% of the seats in its own right. It also wiped out the DPP's allies, and reduced the DPP seat share to only 24%, although the DPP received 38% of all votes cast.

Two referendums were piggybacked onto the January 12 poll, but only 26% of eligible voters took part in them, as compared to 59% turnout in the parliamentary poll itself. Both referendums were declared invalid as participation fell far short of the 50% minimum required.

One referendum sought to recover the assets that the KMT was alleged to have appropriated from public coffers during its five decades of mostly military rule that ended in 2000. The second referendum sought to crack down on government corruption. The KMT campaigned strongly against the first.

To boost support for the DPP's candidate in the March presidential poll among the pro-independence supporters, Chen floated the idea of including as part of the presidential poll a referendum that endorses the island's bid to seek readmission into the United Nations under the formal name of "Taiwan", rather than "the Republic of China" (ROC).

While the civil war between the communist-led forces and pro-capitalist nationalist forces headed by the KMT in China was still raging in 1945, the US backed the KMT-headed government that had already shifted its base to Taiwan to become a founding member of the UN as the ROC. That UN seat was subsequently taken over by the People's Republic of China in 1971 when Washington switched its support to Beijing.

There's serious doubt whether the UN status referendum will go ahead. There's little doubt, however, that the DPP will still try to source support among the pro-independence voters as its winning edge in the March poll. The KMT and its pan-Blue allies favour Taiwan reunifying with

mainland China.

Emile CJ Sheng, a political scientist at the Taipei-based Soochow University, told the January 14 Washington Post that the election result was “not an approval of the [the KMT] but [a] disapproval of President Chen Shui-bian, his style and his integrity”.

In 2006, Chen faced a stubborn mass campaign that sought to oust him from the presidency sparked by embezzlement allegations targetting Chen’s wife and close aides.

The article also quoted analysts as saying that most of the seats the KMT won were decided on pork-barrelling issues such as roads and irrigation projects. A January 15 Asia Times Online article even quoted KMT secretary general Wu Den-yih as saying that the new single-seat parliamentary voting system is a setback for democracy “because historical problems such as vote-buying and the emergence of unprofessional legislators actually grew worse”.

Chen’s victory in 2000 signified a vote for change in Taiwan where the corrupt KMT ruled uninterruptedly since the 1940s, with martial-law rule ended only in 1987. But Chen’s 8-year rule has left many voters disappointed, compounded by a struggling economy and the tainting of his perceived integrity credentials by the embezzlement scandals.

Throughout his 8-year rule, Chen has persistently complained that his hands were tied by the KMT-led campaigns in parliament to block his policy initiatives as well as the national budgets put forward by the cabinet that he appointed.

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