

CROSS-COLOR MOVES A HARBINGER OF CHANGE IN TAIWAN?

by
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Taiwan's 2024 presidential election is fast approaching, with its citizens scheduled to go to the polls on January 13. Following several twists and turns in the past few months, the playing field looks to be set with candidates and their respective running mates having formally [applied for candidacy](#). Irrespective of the final outcome, developments ahead of the election have not only been significant in the evolution of party politics in Taiwan in general but may well hold implications for the future of Taiwanese democracy at large.

A Democratic Two-Party System with Taiwanese Characteristics

In practice, Taiwan is a self-governed island with a democratic [two-party system](#). The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT) are the two major parties that have historically competed in Taiwan's elections, as well as in the Legislative Yuan. The DPP and the KMT have the most seats in the Legislative Yuan, and the third-biggest party, trailing the two, has at most had five seats out of a 113 in the Legislative Yuan since [2008](#) – the first time that Taiwan applied for a [mixed-member electoral system](#) for its legislative election. The [New Power Party](#) (NPP) and [Taiwan People's Party](#) (TPP) have both been the third biggest party with five seats in the Legislative Yuan in [2016](#) and [20W20](#), respectively. When also counting seats from other minor parties, the total number of seats from minor parties [has never been more than 10](#), which amounts to less than 10 percent of the Legislative Yuan total.

In terms of the distribution of seats, Taiwan's two-party system is not unique but it is with regard to the economic ideology and welfare system. Most democracies with a two-party system tend to revolve around [ideological frictions related to economic and welfare policies](#). For instance, one major party may believe more in privatization and economic liberation, while the other may be more dedicated to supporting workers and working

in favor of a balanced income and welfare society. In other words, this can broadly be seen as a competition between the right and the left. The significant [ideological difference between the DPP and the KMT](#) is their stances on cross-strait relations, national identity, and Taiwan's sovereignty. This brings a unique aspect to Taiwanese democracy. Given the significance of these issues, there are high-profile debates and campaigns to [engage voters](#). This is particularly seen in recent years, as China has acted [more hostile](#) towards Taiwan and frequently [targeted Taiwan](#) in the international space.

Taiwan's Presidential Election in Retrospect

Taiwan held its [first direct presidential election](#) in 1996, and the upcoming presidential election on January 13, 2024 will be its eighth consecutive democratic election. During all these years, only one vice president, Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁), was independent of the two major political parties, the DPP and the KMT. He also ultimately [joined the DPP in 2022](#). The rest of Taiwan's presidents and vice presidents have been from the DPP or the KMT. Sometimes, there have been political candidates from minor parties or independent candidates. However, most of them had close relations with either the KMT or the DPP or had no chance of winning the election. The most prominent example is James Soong Chu-yu (宋楚瑜), the founder and current Chairman of the [People First Party](#) (PFP). He has previously run for presidency a total of five times. For example, he ran for election as an independent candidate in 2000 after being [expelled by the KMT](#). At that time, he ranked second in [the presidential election](#) with 36.84 percent of the vote, while Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (DPP) and Lien Chan 連戰 (KMT) received 39.3 percent and 23.1 percent, respectively. This was the only time in the history of Taiwan's presidential elections that candidates outside of the KMT and the DPP had an adequate competitive edge. Even though James Soong Chu-yu was an independent candidate, he can be considered a pan-KMT candidate, considering that he had just been expelled by the KMT right before the election.

The track record of Taiwan's democratic history thus far suggests that candidates have had slim chances of winning without a significant connection to the two major parties. Cross-party collaboration in the



presidential election has only existed between the KMT and pan-KMT candidates or the DPP and pan-DPP candidates. Until this election, there has not been public or high-profile collaboration crossing the dividing ‘color barrier’ of Blue (KMT and pan-KMT) and Green (DPP and pan-DPP). It is noteworthy in this context that [the aim of having party rotation](#) brought the KMT and the TPP together to collaborate for the upcoming election. But, [disagreement](#) on who should be the presidential candidate ultimately led to the [collapse](#) of the collaboration. The current presidential candidates, Ko Wen-je (TPP) and Hou Yu-ih (KMT), in the end, decided to [run for election](#) with their own party members instead of together.

Prospects of ‘Cross-Color’ Collaboration

Even though the cross-color [collaboration negotiation collapsed](#) one day before the registration day for presidential candidates, the negotiation between Blue (KMT) and White (TPP) had been ongoing throughout October and November. As many as [15 KMT regional governors](#) publicly supported the collaboration between the KMT and the TPP with the condition that the latter would agree on how to choose the presidential candidate and vice presidential candidate representing both sides in the collaboration. Former president of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT, worked actively to bridge the potential collaboration, and these efforts reached a point where Ko Wen-je (TPP), Hou Yu-ih (KMT), Ma Ying-jeou, and the KMT’s Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) all signed what was called [the six points agreement](#). This was the closest point to Taiwan having its first cross-color presidential and vice presidential candidates in history.

Even though negotiations eventually collapsed, the situation is still both [unprecedented and significant for Taiwan](#). It shows the potential for cross-color collaboration in its democracy, which has had its unique, but rather rigid, two-party system without such collaboration for a joint presidential election ticket [since 1996](#). Aiming to win the upcoming presidential election, the KMT realized that collaboration with the third largest party could be [a viable alternative](#), and the third party was willing to discuss it. As a party with a considerable legacy in Taiwan’s politics, this move

has opened the KMT’s door for discussing potential collaboration with a party that is not pan-KMT. As such, both the KMT and Taiwan, as a democracy, have come a long way to arrive at this point. The collapse of negotiations, however, shows that Taiwan still has a way to go before a successful cross-color collaboration can be achieved.

A More Collaborative Future

How can major parties like the KMT and the DPP set aside their legacies and show a sincere willingness to collaborate when seeking support from the third biggest party? How can the third largest party, in turn, collaborate with the main party without losing the edge that separates it from the two major parties in Taiwan’s two-party system? Such questions are urgent for Taiwan’s political parties to discuss if the third largest party keeps gaining support from the public to the degree that is [now seen](#).

Moreover, the potential for future cross-color collaboration can be seen in how the DPP, KMT, and TPP candidates have similar discourses regarding cross-strait relations. They, of course, employ different narratives, but a main and overarching mutual point is [the need to preserve the status quo and reestablish bilateral communication with China](#). This might be a potential catalyst to further open up the possibility of cross-color collaboration. When looking closely, it is possible to see how the formerly rigid dynamics and set collaboration patterns between parties and independent politicians might slowly change in Taiwan’s future elections as its democracy continues to evolve. At times, [the question](#) is raised if Taiwan’s democratic achievements are, to an extent, inflated because of juxtaposition with China’s authoritarian system. At other times, Taiwan’s [“not-so-distant authoritarian past”](#) is brought up as looming hammer over its modern democracy. The developments ahead of the 2024 election, however, show that democracy is not only becoming more diverse and resilient in Taiwan but also that there may yet be unexpected turns in its evolution.

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