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Taiwan's defensive democratization

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Abstract: Since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has progressed toward one of Asia's most advanced democracies. This paper looks at the historical and socio-political circumstances and traces the global and domestic factors behind the transformation. Assuming that advanced levels of democratic governance can only be obtained through mediated social control over the state and the economy, the study explores whether democratic values and norms have become internalized and identifies the current caveats of further democratic development. More specifically, the paper argues that although Taiwan's democratization has been caused by external sovereignty-related factors, the discourse on national identity has repoliticized the public political realm after decades of authoritarianism and led to the habitualization of democratic values and norms. The paper concludes with an assessment of the prospects for comprehensive and inclusive public participation in the shaping of Taiwan's political conditions.

Keywords: Taiwan, democratization, foreign relations

Introduction

Taiwan occupies an important position in the global economy in terms of information and communication technology and is a major supplier of goods

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across the industrial spectrum. It ranked as thirteenth in the 2018 Global Competitiveness Index of the World Economic Forum, is the seventh largest economy in Asia, and ranks as eighteenth in the world by gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity per capita.¹

Apart from its economic success story, Taiwan has been categorized as a liberal democracy by Freedom House, Polity IV and Bertelsmann Transformation Index for almost two decades. Although aggregated data analyses of international comparative surveys may serve as corroborating evidence of Taiwan's advanced democratic political system, there is the question of whether Taiwan's democracy has the potential to progress further or will regress like other third-wave democracies in the region, such as Thailand and the Philippines.

Previous studies on Taiwanese democracy mostly measured democratic regime support in terms of public satisfaction toward government performance/economic conditions as well as public trust in democratic institutions and perceptions of corruption.² Others investigated conventional forms of democratic practices such as voting and participation in the activities of political parties to determine the state of Taiwan's democratization.³ In other words, previous research has mostly focused on the *practices* of democratic governance, i.e., the ontic level of democratization.⁴

Assuming that advanced levels of democratic governance can only be obtained through mediated social control over the state and the economy, this study is, however, concerned with the *fabric* of democratization, i.e., the ontological level of Taiwan's political transformation processes. More specifically, this study investigates whether democratic values and norms have become *habitualized*, intrinsic rather than instrumental in nature, through the processes of democratization.

This study argues that Taiwan has de facto progressed far beyond the conventional state of democratic consolidation. That is, the domestic discourse is no longer about possible alternatives to democratic governance. Rather, there is an overarching consensus that social, economic and political problems be solved through democratic processes. More importantly, substantial parts of the population exhibit high levels of *internalized* values of democratic regime support with profound potentials of defending democracy against post-democratic challenges and the legacies of the authoritarian Chinese concept of *minben* (guardianship).⁵ From this perspective, Taiwan's democratization can be regarded a success story.

The paper addresses four questions: First, what factors have contributed to Taiwan's successful transformation? Second, how has the relationship between actors in the state-economy-society triangle changed and how have these changes affected the island republic's democratic processes? Third, what are the caveats of Taiwan's current democracy? Fourth, what is the likely future of Taiwanese democracy?

The organization of the paper is as follows: First, following the introduction, using historical institutionalism, the chronological development of Taiwan's democratic development will be examined, and its key characteristics highlighted. Second, the paper will investigate the power shifts in the state-society-economy triangle over the last few decades to determine the current obstacles of democratic development. Third, the study will assess the prospects for comprehensive and inclusive public participation in the shaping of Taiwan's political conditions.

Historical development of the Taiwanese state and its transition to democracy

Taiwan might be listed as a textbook example of a successful third-wave democracy that followed the conventional development path described in the abundant literature on democratization, i.e., steady economic growth leading to a politically more demanding middle class questioning the legitimacy of the *ancien régime* and demanding mechanisms of broader public participation in the political process. However, the main sources/forces of Taiwan's democratic development are beyond this conventional pattern of development. More specifically, there have been two sets of sources/forces behind the transition to democratic governance. The first is related to the question of national identity and the second to national sovereignty issues.

National identity and democratization

The issue of national identity is rooted in the historical desire of the people of Taiwan to become a "subject" in history. Whether the Manchu Qing Empire (1683–1895), the Japanese Empire (1895–1945), or Republican China (since 1945), Taiwan has only been "an appendage of someone else's subjectivity" throughout the history of the island.⁶ This perceived history of suppression, or "peripheralization," is said to have "ignited" the desire for a new, more indigenous, identification with Taiwan.⁷

Supporters of Taiwanese nationalism describe it as an anti-colonial movement—a movement struggling to overcome past repressions and find Taiwan's own identity among the nations of the world. Taiwanese nationalism has, however, nothing to do with right-wing ideologies or concepts of guerrilla warfare.⁸ Quite the contrary, democratic values and principles have played a crucial role in the formation of Taiwanese nationalism. More specifically, democratization is seen as a process of self-liberation and self-emancipation enabling the people of Taiwan to fulfill the goals of Taiwanese nationalism, namely, to obtain justice, to deal with the past and to end the dominance of "outside" forces in determining nationhood and their future.⁹

The intrinsic link between democracy and Taiwanese nationalism dates back to Japanese colonial rule. Japan obtained jurisdiction over Taiwan from China in 1895 as a result of the Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimonoseki.¹⁰ The Japanese takeover marked the first critical juncture in Taiwan's democratic development. Under the Japanese, the Taiwanese had to endure harsh cultural and political policies. Notwithstanding, the economic and social conditions improved significantly. The number of Taiwanese entrepreneurs increased rapidly. In the early 1940s, the majority of companies in Taiwan were small or medium-sized enterprises owned and staffed by Taiwanese, granting a growing number of people economic independence and higher social status.¹¹

More importantly, local intellectuals engaged in political activities strengthening Taiwanese consciousness, such as the nationalist movement for the establishment of a Taiwanese parliament (*taiwan gikai secchi undō*). Although the Japanese Diet denied each of the movement's fifteen petitions, Taiwanese nationalists successfully contested in local elections.¹² By the end of World War II, three out of four council members were Taiwanese.¹³ Lai, Myers and Wei point out that the elections held under the Japanese not only "whetted the political appetite of the Taiwanese elite" but also got them accustomed to the idea of basing government on elections.¹⁴

To conclude, the historical desire to become a "subject" in history coupled with the idea of achieving such a goal by democratic means constitute the first set of sources/forces of Taiwan's democratization.

National sovereignty and democratization

At the end of World War II, the United States, as the principal occupying power of Japanese territory, authorized Chinese President Chiang Kai-shek to administer Taiwan.¹⁵ On 25 October 1945, the first troops of the Republic of China arrived in Taiwan and the instrument of surrender was handed over to officials of the Kuomintang (KMT) government.¹⁶

The takeover marked the second critical juncture in Taiwan's democratic development. The new regime abolished many of the governmental institutions established by the Japanese, enforced Chinese law, forbade Japanese and Sinitic languages other than Mandarin, such as Minnanhua and Hakka, and took over key positions in former state-run enterprises.¹⁷ Political and social rights granted to the Taiwanese under Japanese rule were severely restricted.¹⁸

The 1946 Constitution promised to restore those rights. Resembling the Weimar constitution, it stipulated that the republic should have a semi-presidential form of government consisting of a parliamentary system with the president fulfilling the role of a political adjudicator between legislative and executive branches of government.¹⁹ The constitution also granted substantial rights to citizens to form institutions of local self-governance. However, when it was

promulgated in early 1947, the KMT government announced that Taiwan would first have to undergo a period of tutelage under the leadership of the party. Restricted political rights, growing economic hardship and social injustices finally culminated into the 28 February Incident of 1947 and the subsequent massacre of thousands of civilians.²⁰

In 1949, the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek lost the civil war in China and retreated to Taiwan. Consequently, more than eight hundred thousand Chinese Nationalists fled to Taiwan, accounting for about ten percent of the island's population.²¹ Taipei was declared the provisional capital of the Republic of China. In the same year, Mao Tse-tung's proclaimed the People's Republic of China as the de facto and de jure successor state of the Kuomintang's Republic of China. The founding of the People's Republic of China put the KMT's claim of legally exercising sovereignty over Taiwan and representing China at the United Nations and other international organizations into question.²²

The KMT regime benefited from Taiwan's geostrategic position and its permanent seat at the UN Security Council. More specifically, the US policy of containing Asian communism (e.g., Korean War) was a crucial factor in the US decision to assist Chiang Kai-shek in creating the myth that his government was the sole and legitimate government of China and offering economic and military aid and advice to Taiwan. Between 1950 and the mid-1960s, economic aid to Taiwan totaled USD 1.5 billion.²³ The KMT's military expenditures were substantial and without US assistance Taiwan's defense against communist attack was infeasible.²⁴

Domestically, US assistance helped the KMT regime to implement far-reaching economic programs, such as the land reform and import-substitution industrialization.²⁵ Internationally, however, defending the KMT's international status as the sole legitimate government of China became an increasingly difficult task. In the 1960s, a growing number of small (communist) states were established and joined the UN. The newly admitted states were mostly in favor of the People's Republic of China and thus questioned the legitimacy of the KMT government to represent China in world affairs.²⁶

The US government and its allies successfully defended the KMT's UN representation until 1971, when UN Resolution 2758 was passed to "restore all its rights to the People's Republic of China and to recognize the representatives of its Government as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations, and to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy at the United Nations and in all the organizations related to it."

The increasing isolation of the KMT regime, China's growing public image as a liberalizing state as well as a new wave of democratization originating in

Europe and spreading to other parts of the world made the KMT regime aware of the fact that it had to adapt to the radical global changes to defend its legitimacy and Taiwan's sovereignty.²⁷ In other words, the KMT government was obliged to liberalize Taiwan domestically to gain international recognition as an independent state living up to the global aspirations of democratic values and norms. Deng Xiaoping's licensing of discussion on political reforms in 1986 and the downfall of Marco's regime in the neighboring Philippines intensified such demands and substantially contributed to President Chiang Ching-kuo's decision to implement far-reaching political reforms, such as the lifting of martial law in 1987.²⁸

To conclude, the permanent threat of losing national sovereignty coupled with the morally obliged need to utilize democracy to defend it constitute the second set of sources/forces of Taiwan's democratization.

Post-Cold War democratization

The lifting of martial law marked the third critical juncture in Taiwan's democratization since it not only paved the way for democratic development but also provided Taiwan with ample opportunities to redefine its own identity among other states. The issues of national identity and national sovereignty remained the key forces behind democratization. The following section looks at how they affected nationhood and democratization.

Lee Teng-hui, a native of Taiwan, succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo after his death in 1988. Under his presidency (1988–2000), major political and social reforms were carried out, such as the abolition of the Temporary Provisions,²⁹ the introduction of constitutional amendments calling for direct presidential elections, and the establishment of a compulsory universal medical insurance system.³⁰

Externally, Lee pursued a proactive foreign policy that highlighted Taiwan's outstanding democratic and economic achievements and the island republic's intention to play a greater role in international affairs.³¹ In order to achieve his goals, he thought it was necessary to break with KMT traditions and gave up claims of representing China in international affairs. More specifically, Lee defined his government as the government of the Republic of China on Taiwan and spoke of a "special state-to-state" relationship to describe Taiwan's relations with China.

One of the key features of his proactive foreign policy initiatives was the increased usage of global mass media advertising to convey the (alternative) narrative of a democratic Taiwan striving for recognition and opportunities to share its experience and capabilities with the international community. The most prominent example of this new approach was Lee's visit to his alma mater at Cornell University in 1995. Several international news networks, such

as CNN, offered live coverage of his speech highlighting Taiwan's democratic achievements.

Except for Ma Ying-jeou (KMT, 2008–2016), successive presidents have followed in the footsteps of Lee Teng-hui in terms of utilizing democracy to maintain/gain legitimacy and to defend Taiwan's sovereignty against Chinese irredentism. As such, Chen Shui-bian (DPP, 2000–2008) envisaged turning Taiwan into Asia's most democratic state. His policies called for the establishment of an independent national human rights commission based on the Paris Principles, transitional justice, the abolition of the death penalty, the ratification of two international human rights covenants (UN covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and their codification into national legislation.³² Leaders of the KMT and its splinter parties increasingly felt threatened by the president's political agenda, especially his transitional justice and de-Sinification policies, and considered Chen's presidency a dictatorship.³³ As the DPP lacked a majority in parliament, most of Chen Shui-bian's policies could not be implemented.

When Tsai Ying-wen (DPP) took office in 2016, the DPP had a majority in parliament, which provided the party with an unprecedented opportunity to pass legislation related to transitional justice initiatives, such as the restitution of property that the KMT had illegally or by improper means obtained during the martial-law era and the establishment of an independent Transitional Justice Commission. The Commission began operation in May 2018 and is authorized to investigate atrocities committed between 1945 and 1992, to expropriate the archives of the Kuomintang and its affiliated organizations, and to remove or rename all commemorative symbols of authoritarian rule.

The government under Tsai Ying-wen has continued Chen Shui-bian's promotion of a cosmopolitan Taiwan free from Chinese interference, and has utilized public diplomacy to narrate its policies to enhance Taiwan's international recognition as a progressive liberal state, contrasting itself from China's authoritarianism.³⁴ Since her inauguration in May 2016, there has been substantial international media coverage of Taiwan's support for liberal-democratic values and civic nationalism.

One prominent example here is China's decision in November 2017 to sentence Taiwanese democracy activist Lee Ming-cheh to five years in prison for promoting democracy in China and the subsequent international media coverage of Taiwan questioning the verdict and urging China to release the activist since spreading democratic values does not constitute a crime. Another major news story focused on President Tsai Ying-wen's educational policy announcement to include seven Southeast Asian languages as elective courses in primary schools in response to the growing number of children with different ethnic backgrounds as well as plans to introduce English as an official language.

A few months earlier, major global media outlets covered the landmark ruling of the Constitutional Court, affirming the right of same-sex couples to marry, and paving the way for Taiwan to become Asia's first country to legalize same-sex marriages.³⁵

Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016) temporarily discontinued the nation-building of his two predecessors by promoting ethnic nationalism or loyalty to the Chinese ethnic community. The policy shift brought about a revival of Chinese nationalism, putting an end to the Chen Shui-bian's cosmopolitan state and previous work toward transitional justice.³⁶ More importantly, Ma prioritized economic cooperation with the Mainland over democratic development and national sovereignty.³⁷ In international affairs, the narratives that Taiwan's public diplomacy broadcast to the world shifted accordingly. Instead of presenting Taiwan as an exporter of democracy Ma narrated it as a "preserver of traditional Chinese culture" and dispatched exhibitions of traditional Chinese calligraphy around the world.³⁸

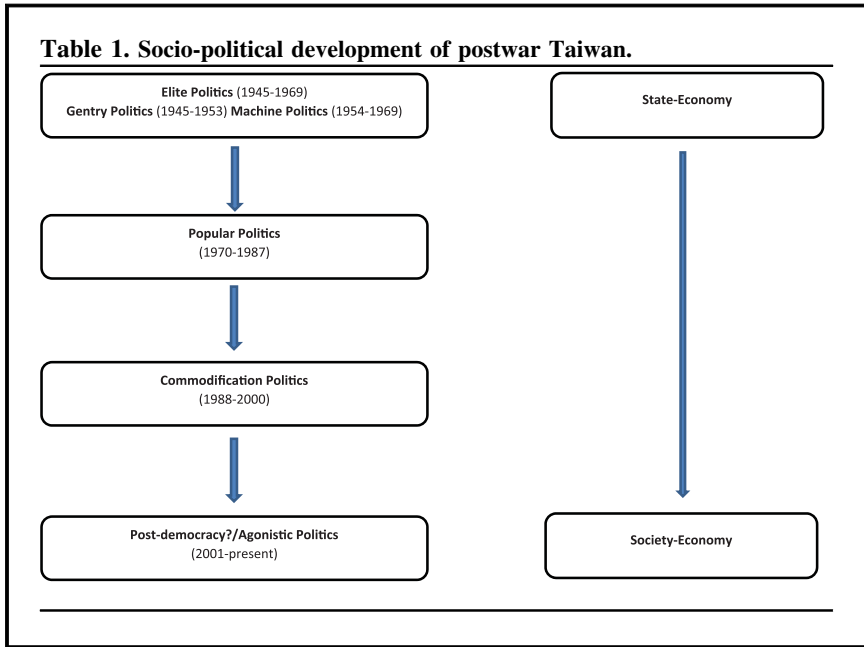
Evolution and changes in state-society relations

As mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, democratization in our analysis is seen as a development toward comprehensive and inclusive public participation in the political process to achieve mediated social control of the state and the economy. In other words, democratization should strengthen the power of society vis-à-vis the state and the economy. By looking at power shifts in the state-society-economy triangle, this section of the paper addresses the question of whether such a process has been in evidence in Taiwan's contemporary political transformation. As illustrated in [Table 1](#), there have been four stages in Taiwan's development of popular socio-political participation.

Elite politics (1945–1969)

During Japanese rule, the local gentry increasingly took part in shaping socio-economic conditions through local assemblies. After the arrival of the KMT, a significant part of the local gentry was executed in the aftermath of the 2–28 Incident, whereas others were either co-opted or replaced by party officials.³⁹ The military, the police and a network of informers protected the authoritarian state. The most feared state agency was the Taiwan Garrison Command (TGC), a secret state security body founded in 1945 under the Ministry of Defense. The Garrison Command was responsible for suppressing activities viewed as promoting communism, democracy and Taiwan's independence.⁴⁰

Apart from the security network, the KMT gradually replaced gentry politics by machine politics, which focused on recruiting Taiwanese into the party,



establishing patron-client relationships between the KMT and local elites, vote buying, turnout buying, and “guiding” the society at large in terms of their political preferences. Machine politics fundamentally transformed Taiwan’s political culture. Elections became money-driven and increasingly influenced by organized crime.⁴¹

Popular politics (1970–1987)

By the early 1970s, machine politics could not address the various problems caused by the KMT regime’s economic and social policies, such as rising labor disputes, urbanization, environmental degradation and a politically more demanding middle-class.⁴² The political vacuum was filled by middle-class politicians who tried to explore the power of the people. The new era of popular politics brought about several influential politicians, such as Hsu Hsin-liang, who sought to reach out to the masses by attacking the government’s social and economic policies.⁴³

Various periodical publications, such as the Formosa Magazine, gained popularity and their editorial offices developed into community help centers, where ordinary people could get advice on legal, social and economic issues. Middle-class intellectuals sought for greater and more meaningful participation

in the political process, especially in local and national elections.⁴⁴ John Kuan, a senior KMT party official, described the political and social atmosphere of the 1980s with the following words:

During the past four decades, our society has undergone three major changes in development. In the 1950s and early 1960s political forces predominated. From the 1960s on, economic forces had the upper hand. Now we are entering a third stage where social forces are predominant. People are better educated and more resourceful today. They are concerned with social issues such as environmental protection, law enforcement, and public health measures. Moreover, they are ready to act if necessary to make their voices heard.⁴⁵

Commodification politics (1988–2000)

The lifting of the martial law decree in 1987 and the subsequent political liberalization led to what local political analysts described as an “over-politicized society.”⁴⁶ That is, there was great enthusiasm among the people, and it seemed as though almost everyone wanted to become a politician. With political parties mushrooming, electoral competition intensified, and Taiwan eventually entered the era of what may be termed commodification politics—the overlapping between politics and consumption.⁴⁷

Celebrity politics, variety shows, strippers and candidates challenging rivals with the size of their nipples were among the attempts to gain popular support.⁴⁸ The marketization of politics sparked off a serious debate about its negative impact on democratic development. Apart from being highlighted in popular movies, such as *The Candidates* by producer Hsu Li-kong, commodification politics was strongly criticized by members of the local academia, who alleged that the new mode of political communication trivialized politics and led people to believe that elections are the ultimate goal of democracy rather than part of the democratic process—a misconception, they believed, that would cultivate mob rule and eventually lead to populist authoritarianism and the end of the rule of law.⁴⁹

Post-democracy? (2001–present)

The year 2000 marked the fourth critical juncture in Taiwan’s democratization. First, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Taiwan’s largest opposition party, was elected president. The victory resulted in a peaceful transfer of power, which was a major step forward in Taiwan’s democratic process. Second, the transformation also brought to light the potential risks of Taiwan’s political environment becoming post-democratic.

Post-democratic societies fulfill the formal requirements of democratic states. They continue to utilize all institutions of democratic governance but have surrendered most of their democratic rights to a small politico-economic

elite.⁵⁰ Colin Crouch points out that the operational logic of liberal democracy, with its overemphasis on the electoral process, has accelerated the process of commodification and rationalization of politics, reducing citizens to consumers, turning politicians into wholesalers, and producing ample opportunities for business elites to transform the state into a self-service outlet.⁵¹ But, to what extent has Taiwan become a post-democratic society?

Although Taiwan had already experienced the marketization of politics in the early 1990s and local scholars at that time had highlighted the possible negative effects of portraying elections as the only form of public participation in the democratic process,⁵² the risk of becoming a post-democratic society was more imminent a decade later with the rising dependence on big business to finance the capital-intensive electoral campaigns and, more importantly, the local academia endorsing the neo-liberal logic of contemporary liberal democracy.⁵³ The following section of the paper elaborates on the dynamics behind this phenomenon and its effects on Taiwan's democratization.

In the late 1990s, the social side effects of changing social values and globalization, such as aging society, environmental degradation, urbanization, individualization of risks, de-industrialization and growing income inequality, could no longer be denied.⁵⁴ Like in any other contemporary democracy, politicians in Taiwan fell victim to the global neo-liberal belief that economic growth could solve the problems of advanced capitalist societies and began to seek alliances with business conglomerates.⁵⁵

Taiwanese historian Wu Rwei-Ren points out that every democratically elected president attempted to form strong ties with business leaders, which meant an explicit shift to the right—to social inequality.⁵⁶ During his eight years in office, Chen Sui-bian (DPP) incorporated major business groups, strongly promoted the privatization of state-run enterprises and had more leading entrepreneurs as advisors than the previous pro-business KMT government under Lee Teng-hui.⁵⁷

The state-business alliance meant a major paradigm shift. Previously, the DPP had maintained close ties with left-wing movements, such as environmentalists, women rights groups and labor rights organizations. The shift to the right not only frustrated many key supporters of the DPP but also failed to produce the expected economic welfare effect. His successor, Ma Ying-jeou, relied on neo-liberalism even more due to his economy-first policy, worsening the economic condition of lower income groups and the middle class while benefitting the rich.⁵⁸

When the economic welfare of the people failed to improve during Chen Shui-bian's term in office, observers put it down to the incompetence of the president and his government while a somewhat different narrative occurred during Ma's term in office. That is, the negative social and economic changes

were associated with democratic governance. Soon democratization was accused of undermining the capacity of the so-called developmental state to exert control over the economy and income distribution, which either created or reinforced the popular narrative about a growing nostalgia for the good old authoritarian times with a booming economy.⁵⁹ The nostalgia itself in turn reportedly weakened popular support for democracy and helped to legitimize Ma Ying-jeou's more authoritarian pro-business government.

Fortunately, nostalgia did not grow nor did popular support for democratic values and norms decrease as suggested by political analysts and media reports. The new narrative was predominantly the result of discursive bandwagoning and the adoption of neo-liberal concepts in defining the objectives of democratic governance and the role of citizens in its functioning. That is, since the mid-2000s, local scholars have claimed that democratic governance "must win citizens' support through better performance," while claiming that "public confidence in democracy's superiority has waned" since democracy has failed to deliver economic benefits.⁶⁰

The success of democratic consolidation was thus primarily evaluated on government performance and socio-economic conditions, vesting extensive responsibilities in political elites to fulfill public demands. Citizens, on the other hand, were reduced to consumers with their political obligations restricted to expressing their satisfaction toward the services offered by the elites. This propagandized neo-liberal notion of democratic governance however neglects the fact that political systems do not get more democratic because of high approval ratings or fervent democratic desires. Democratic development depends foremost on the involvement of citizens in demanding, creating, and exercising democracy.⁶¹

In general, governments are said to be first and foremost instrumentally evaluated by their citizens.⁶² Continued failure to meet public expectations undermines regime support in democracies as well as in authoritarian states.⁶³ However, instrumental regime support is contextually moderated by democratic institutions and procedures. In consolidated democracies, citizens thus would rather hold incumbent governments or politicians accountable for performance deficits than question the appropriateness of democratic governance per se.⁶⁴

If seen from this perspective, Taiwan has not experienced a decline in democratic support since the lifting of martial law in 1987. There has, however, been a generational conflict regarding democratic notions and priorities. Younger generations tend to exhibit comparably stronger identifications with liberal values and norms, whereas older generations in general tend to either prioritize economic development over democracy or view democracy in light of the traditional Chinese concept of *minben* as explained further below.⁶⁵

Unsurprisingly, it was the younger generation who took the lead in protesting against the KMT's policy of servicing the interests of big business and selling Taiwan's sovereignty to China behind closed doors in exchange for lucrative business deals. The older generations, on the other hand, appeared to be more concerned about their personal economic prosperity than their personal freedoms. The post-democratic mindset of the latter group led to the success of the almost unknown Han Kuo-yu (KMT) in the 2018 mayoral election in Kaoshiung.

In his campaign speeches, Han Kuo-yu promised the people of Kaoshiung numerous preposterous projects, such as building a hippodrome and a local branch of Disneyland and predicted that wealth would come to everyone once he got elected. Han's promises and controversial verbal attacks on his opponents have gained popularity among substantial portions of the population. His critics, on the other hand, have compared him with Donald Trump because of his frequent distorting of the truth, offensive remarks about women and unfounded accusations against other members of society. They see in him and his supporters a threat to democracy.⁶⁶

Social media and conventional media outlets have played an important role in the creation of the Han Kuo-yu hype. Although international organizations, such as Freedom House and Reporters without Borders, have categorized Taiwan's media environment as being free, it is often described as partisan, sensational, irresponsible and driven by commercial interests.⁶⁷ In the authoritarian past, the state controlled the media. With democratization control shifted away from the state to business conglomerates. However, the main political/commercial threat to an independent media comes from China, since a substantial part of Taiwan's mass media is owned by pro-China business groups which have become the focus of several large-scale protests, accusing them of disseminating disinformation to influence public opinion.⁶⁸

Prospects for comprehensive and inclusive political participation

As pointed out earlier in this paper, Taiwan's democratic development has been constructed by external sovereignty-related factors. During the Cold War, democracy and economic development, manifested in anti-communist propaganda, became the *raison d'état* of the KMT state and even today democracy legitimizes Taiwan's existence as a sovereign state—a distinct political entity—separate from China. As such, Taiwanese democracy is the synthesis of an antagonistic relationship between China and Taiwan and without this antagonism, Taiwan's political system would probably not exist in its current form.

China's increasingly aggressive policies of irredentism as illustrated in the ongoing repression of the democratic movement in Hong Kong leave little room to assume that the antagonistic constellation will change soon. In other words, Taiwan will for a long time remain compelled to utilize its democratic achievements as a means of defending its sovereignty against Chinese irredentism. The outside forces behind Taiwan's democratization are thus still in existence, but what about the internal forces?

In a recent paper, political scientist Zhong Yang acknowledged the particular emphasis of Taiwanese nationalism on democratic values and norms but questioned its authenticity.⁶⁹ He pointed out that cross-country surveys, such as the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), show similar moderate democratic values among citizens of Taiwan and China. He argues that since Taiwanese nationalism and its highly publicized adherence to democracy has predominately been driven by outside forces, Taiwanese society lacks a distinct cultural transformation. As such, their democratic aspirations are predominately instrumental rather than intrinsic.⁷⁰

Studies on regime support distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental involvement in political processes at the individual level.⁷¹ The latter is guided by self-interest and thus predominantly a means of improving material living, whereas the former is mostly predicated on internalized values. Whether popular support is instrumental or intrinsic is of critical importance to the stability and viability of democratic systems.

Internalized democratic values enable citizens to distinguish between support for political leaders and support for democratic institutions and procedures. As such, they tend to hold incumbent governments or politicians accountable for performance deficits instead of questioning the appropriateness of the political system *per se*.⁷² Thus, intrinsically supported political systems have the potential to sustain severe political and economic crises, whereas performance-based systems depend on the mood of the times. They are fragile and vulnerable to "populist leaders who argue that economic development requires the sacrifice of political liberties."⁷³ The process of democratic consolidation can thus be seen as a learning process in which democratic values become habituated and deeply internalized in social, institutional and mental life.⁷⁴

When applied to Taiwan, we can say that the stability of democracy as a political system rests on the question of whether Taiwanese nationalist support for democratic governance is primarily caused by external sovereignty-related factors, thus being instrumental, or whether it substantially predicates upon internalized democratic values, thus being intrinsic. Whether support is intrinsic or instrumental can be established by probing into the substance and depth of popular commitment to democracy. Intrinsic support exists when citizens not only reject authoritarian alternatives to democratic governance, but also

exhibit a clear value orientation toward fundamental principles of liberal democracy, such as political equality, separation of power, rule of law, pluralism and accountability.⁷⁵

The following section of the paper endeavors to show that Taiwan's society genuinely possesses intrinsic democratic values and norms. The first positive sign is the fact that the public discourse is no longer about possible alternatives to democratic governance. Rather, there is an overarching consensus that democratic governance is the only option. That is, all political and socio-economic problems must be solved through democratic processes.

However, Taiwan, like any other advanced democracy, is exposed to the inherent risks of becoming post-democratic, falling victim to commodification politics or what Theodor Adorno termed the culture industry, eventually causing society to surrender its democratic rights to a small group of politico-economic elites.⁷⁶ We have shown in the previous section of this paper that Taiwan has so far dealt quite well with the perils of contemporary liberal democratic governance.

It is important to point out that commodification politics has played a crucial role in the socialization of democratic values and norms. First, applying Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, along with John Storey's framework of cultural consumption, Chuang Yin-Chia demonstrated that commodification politics has significantly contributed to Taiwan's democratization by accelerating/fostering processes of national identity formation.⁷⁷ More specifically, the growing lack of international legal sovereignty forced the KMT regime to initiate a public debate rather than a brutal crackdown on the supporters of Taiwanese nationalism. The marketization of politics has been instrumental in this process because it has offered new avenues of political communication. Since different narratives of the nation were publicly contested instead of being forcefully marginalized, the discourse on national identity *repoliticized* the public political realm after decades of authoritarian rule.

Lee Teng-hui started the process of *repoliticization* after the lifting of martial law in 1987 by defining nationalism as something beyond ethnic identity. More specifically, his concept of the "New Taiwanese" deconstructed Chinese pride, called for Taiwan's de-Sinification and cultivation of new feelings of "nationness" with the aim of transforming ethnic nationalism into political nationalism.⁷⁸

Lee Teng-hui's "New Taiwanese" referred to those Mainlanders who called Taiwan home. Chen Shui-bian expanded the meaning by including all new immigrants, especially from Southeast Asian countries. In his inaugural speech in May 2004, he put emphasis on the fact that Taiwan had over the last few centuries become the home of migrants with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and that Taiwan was transforming into a multi-ethnic society. Chen

Shui-bian's concept of Taiwanese nationalism thus marginalized the ethnic (Chinese) component even more and envisioned a cosmopolitan nation.⁷⁹

Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016) tried to return to the Cold-War ethnic Chinese nation-building process by appealing to common economic interests and turning them into salient issues of national identification.⁸⁰ The new mode of national identification de facto depoliticized the issue of national identity and brought about a rapprochement with Beijing, followed by a wave of *econophoria* with decreasing commitment to democratic governance.⁸¹ His successor Tsai Ying-wen resumed the process of *repolitization* by reopening the public debate about national identity, sovereignty, and the island's right of self-determination.

Second, this *repolitization*, or return of the political, is much more than just a temporary process. As a matter of fact, it has triggered a process of internalization of democratic values and norms. In other words, the *repolitization* has transferred individual notions of what constitutes a "good citizen," from being allegiant (duty-based) to being assertive (engaged).⁸²

Allegiant citizens are apolitical. Their political lives are dominated by social conformity and restricted to routinized, conventional forms of political activities, such as voting, vote canvassing, and participation in party conventions. Assertive citizens, on the other hand, are involved in less conventional but more authentic expression of political participation, such as petitioning, protests, strikes and boycotts. They form opinions independently of others, act on their own principles, and address social needs. Engaged (assertive) citizens are thus considered the pillars of democracy.⁸³ But how assertive are Taiwan's citizens? Has the *repolitization* brought about any behavioral and attitudinal changes?

Schafferer and Evenden showed in their research on public attitudes toward democratic governance in Taiwan that the *repolitization* has mostly affected the younger generations in urban areas.⁸⁴ Employing survey data of the fourth wave of the *Asian Barometer Survey* (ABS) for Taiwan, the scholars used measurements of support for democracy and liberal values to detect homogenous clusters with different democratic support patterns.

Table 2 illustrates the results of their latent class analysis. Four clusters were found. The *Progressive Democrats* comprise about 20% of the population and are closest to our definition of the assertive (engaged) citizen. An allegiant (duty-based) notion of citizenship, on the other hand, is shared by the *Conservative Democrats* (30%). The two remaining clusters are somewhere in between. Based on the results, it may be concluded that popular participation in politics is diversified and that there seems to be considerable support for more active citizenship. That is, despite several post-democratic developments, there is still a significant portion of society resisting the reduction of

Table 2. Multivariate analysis Taiwan-Asian Barometer Survey (Wave 4).

Conservative Democrats (30%)	Conservative Pragmatic Democrats (12%)	Pragmatic Democrats (38%)	Progressive Democrats (20%)
Older generations; male; low levels of education, post-materialism, political serfdom, psychological involvement, democratic conviction, socio-political participation; most conservative cluster; high levels of conventional political participation; KMT or unaffiliated; low levels of support for Taiwanese nationalism	Younger generations; lower levels of education; high levels of conservatism, political, serfdom, economic, conventional political participation; KMT/DPP or unaffiliated; high levels of support for Taiwanese nationalism	Older generations; senior high school; moderate levels of post-materialism, conservatism, socio-political participation, democratic conviction; low levels of conventional political participation; medium levels of support for Taiwanese nationalism	Young; female; high levels of education, post-materialism, socio-political participation; unaffiliated or DPP; high levels of democratic conviction and support for Taiwanese nationalism

Source: Author; C. Schafferer and M. Evenden (2017) "Explaining Democratic Consolidation and Regress in East Asia: A Multivariate Analysis" (paper presented at the 11th Congress of the Asian Political and International Studies Association. Phitsanulok: Naresuan University).

democratic citizenship to an act of consumerism. In this context, it is important to note that the group of assertive citizens (*Progressive Democrats*) is the youngest among the four clusters, whereas the cluster with the most allegiant citizens (*Conservative Democrats*) represents the older generations. In other words, the number of allegiant citizens will naturally decline over time.

The diametrically different notion of democratic governance between the *Progressive Democrats* and the *Conservative Democrats* constitutes not only a generational conflict but also encapsulates the ongoing conflict between the advocates of Taiwanese and Chinese nationalism. Although both modes of nationalism have utilized democracy to gain/maintain legitimacy at home as well as abroad, each has not only envisaged a different nation but has also assigned different roles to democracy in the nation-building process. More specifically, there is the conviction among Taiwanese nationalists that an independent Taiwanese nation-state could only be achieved through the implementation of democratic governance. The right of self-determination is the guiding principle here.⁸⁵

Although democracy in the sense of anti-communism is also a constitutive part of Chinese nationalist identity, democracy itself has played a subordinate role. More specifically, democratic governance not only contradicts the Chinese traditional concept of *minben* (guardianship) propagated by KMT intellectuals but also poses a threat to its ethnic nation-building process. Political scientist Shi Tianjian elaborates on the authoritarian dimensions of *minben* in his works and notes that it “invests elites with full authority to use their own judgement in policy making without interference from the people.”⁸⁶

Historically, the KMT under Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo joined US efforts to contain communism in Asia and labeled itself as the government of *Free China*, distinguishing itself from the communist Chinese government in Beijing. However, being anti-communist does not necessarily mean being supportive of democratic governance. During the Cold War and the subsequent era of global democratization, democracy was de-facto an unwanted shadow haunting the KMT regime, but in search of security and legitimacy the regime accepted its social obligations vis-à-vis the United States in particular and global democratic aspirations in general.⁸⁷

The publicized KMT adherence to democracy has in fact mostly been a classic form of social acculturation,⁸⁸ which is described as “the general process of adopting the beliefs and behavioral patterns of the surrounding culture.”⁸⁹ It results in conformity and is a process of incomplete internalization. As such, it does not actually require an actor to agree “with the merits of a group’s position,” and thus “may result in outward conformity with a social convention without private acceptance or corresponding changes in private practices.”⁹⁰ The hallmarks of acculturation, including orthodoxy, mimicry, and status maximization, were most apparent during the KMT’s authoritarian rule.⁹¹

Advocates of Chinese nationalism thus tend to exhibit a pragmatic notion of democratic governance. Local scholars, such as Chien Yong-hsiang, Wang Chen-huan, Hwang Kuo-kuang, Philip Yang and Yang Tai-shuen, popularizing the notion believe that the question of democratization is not about advancing the universality of political rights and civil liberties, but about the use of state power.⁹² Democracy is seen here as a means to ensuring political and social stability. Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian are considered “trouble-makers” and their leadership style “authoritarian,” mostly because their “populist nationalist rhetoric” has brought about “instability” and “endangered regional security.” Moreover, the popularized national identity “division” is believed to justify a relativization of liberal democratic principles as previously exercised by the Ma government.⁹³

Prolonged processes of acculturation and internalization of the Chinese *min-ben* concept on the side of the Chinese nationalists (*Conservative Democrats*) and internalization of democratic values/norms on the side of the Taiwanese nationalists (*Progressive Democrats*) have resulted in increasingly divergent views regarding democratic/authoritarian governance.

Daffyd Fell highlighted these diverging perceptions in a recent analysis by looking at how incumbent President Tsai Ying-wen (DPP) and former President Ma Ying-jeou (KMT) describe Taiwan's current political situation in public speeches. He points out that although both politicians claimed that Taiwan's democracy is in danger, the way they conceptualized this danger was markedly different.⁹⁴

Tsai spoke of “a thriving democratic society,” claimed that Taiwan would “set the standard for transitioning democracies around the world,” and said that Taiwan showed how progressive values, such as same-sex marriage, can take root in Asian societies. Citing several areas, such as transitional justice legislation, Ma argued that the DPP has undermined Taiwan's democracy to bring it to the brink of North Korean-style totalitarianism. Ma believes that the threat to Taiwan's democracy is from a single domestic source: the DPP. Tsai, on the other hand, highlighted how the authoritarian threat is coming from China in multiple forms. There was no mentioning of China's irredentism in Ma's speech and instead he “has tended to see it largely in terms of economic opportunity, with no security implications.”⁹⁵

The two diverging notions of democratic governance also have substantially different implications for regional security and Taiwan's leverage in international affairs. Former President Ma Ying-jeou and Chinese nationalist intellectuals, such as Samuel Ku, argue that Taiwan could only improve its overall global image, heighten its diplomatic leverage, and get more opportunities to engage in multilateral activities through closer ties with China (i.e., adhering to the so-called 1992 Consensus).⁹⁶ In a recent speech, Ma argued that Taiwan

under Tsai had already lost seven diplomatic allies because of her “backsliding cross-strait ties.”⁹⁷

Tsai Ying-wen, however, holds the view that adhering to the 1992 Consensus means remaining locked in the historical Taiwan-Strait plot because the Consensus constitutes an impediment to creating an alternative, multidimensional, nuanced narrative about the Taiwanese “national story”—a story beyond being presented as a renegade province.⁹⁸ Since Lee Teng-hui, presidents (with the sole exception of Ma Ying-jeou) have tried to break out of the historical Chinese discourse by conveying alternative messages of an entirely different Taiwan, namely that of a progressive peace-loving island republic with its own (multicultural) identity.⁹⁹

Tsai acknowledges that Taiwan is short of *international legal sovereignty*. As such, it lacks diplomatic recognition by most states, is deprived of membership in international organizations, such as the United Nations, and its participation in the activities of the international community is restricted.¹⁰⁰ In order to break out of the structural constraints of the cross-strait animosities, Tsai Ying-wen (as well as Chen Shui-bian and Lee Teng-hui) has envisaged the expansion of Taiwan’s *interdependency sovereignty* (i.e., the ability of a state to exert transnational influence/control) and *functional sovereignty* (i.e., the ability of a state with insufficient *international legal sovereignty* to engage in international organizations) through multiple efforts, such as the New Southbound Policy (NSP) and humanitarian aid.¹⁰¹

More specifically, in the absence of extensive diplomatic relations, the focus of international relations has shifted away from being predominantly state managed to being people-centered and based on social interchanges. As such, there has been an increasing involvement of private enterprises and individuals in the government’s attempt to promote Taiwan in Southeast Asian countries and to enhance exchanges in the areas of business, tourism and culture. Instead of promoting itself as a “secondary imperial power,” the government under President Tsai seeks for a careful socialization process with increased emphasis on what Taiwan can contribute to the welfare of other states.¹⁰²

While Taiwan’s new narrative is increasingly getting international attention, the socialization processes of the NSP have further integrated Taiwan into the Asian community, helping Taiwan to reposition itself as a bridge between Southeast Asia and the north.¹⁰³ Moreover, Taiwan has become a symbol of democracy and resistance against authoritarian China, and a safe haven for those in the region trying to escape political persecution.

The NSP has also had implications for Taiwan’s national identity formation. Tsai’s government sees in the steady increase in migration from Southeast Asian countries opportunities for further de-Sinicization and consolidation of the ongoing trends toward multiculturalism. The new Taiwanese identity roots

on democratic values and the belief that being Taiwanese means living and working in Taiwan.¹⁰⁴ It thus stands in sharp contrast to the KMT/China promoted ethnic Chinese nationalism with its intrinsic authoritarian characteristics.

Conclusion

Taiwan has been categorized as a liberal democracy by Freedom House, Polity IV and Bertelsmann Transformation Index for almost two decades. In this context, four questions were asked at the beginning of this paper. First, what factors have contributed to Taiwan's successful transformation? Second, how has the relationship between actors in the state-economy-society triangle changed and how have these changes affected the island republic's democratic processes? Third, what are the caveats of Taiwan's current democracy? Fourth, what is the likely future of Taiwanese democracy?

In answer to the first question, Taiwan has followed the conventional path of democratic development—steady economic growth leading to a politically more demanding middle class questioning the legitimacy of the *ancien régime* and demanding mechanisms of broader public participation in the political process. Notwithstanding, this paper argues that external sovereignty-related factors have been the primary sources/forces of democratization. The US policy of containing Asian communism and the KMT's search for legitimacy after the lost civil war in China were instrumental in the KMT's decision to make democracy and economic development, manifested in anti-communist propaganda, the *raison d'état* of the KMT state. A further important (sovereignty-related) factor has been the growth of Taiwanese nationalism and its firm belief that only through democratization can a process of self-liberation and self-emancipation be triggered, eventually enabling the people of Taiwan to fulfill the goals of Taiwanese nationalism, namely to obtain justice, to deal with the past and to end the dominance of "outside" forces in determining nationhood. In short, national identification, the historical antagonisms between China and Taiwan, and Taiwan's quest for international recognition constitute the very sources/forces of Taiwanese democracy.

In answer to the second question, there have been four stages of development (Table 1). Between 1945 and the late 1960s, gentry politics was replaced by machine politics controlled by KMT party elites. The party state apparatus became the key decision maker. By the early 1970s, the KMT's machine politics could not address the various social problems caused by the regime's economic policies and middle-class politicians sought for greater and meaningful participation in the government's economic and social policy making.

After the lifting of martial law in 1987, political parties mushroomed, electoral competition intensified, and Taiwan entered the era of

commodification politics. During this era, the de-legitimization of the KMT party-state apparatus started, eventually eroding developmental state capacities and gradually shifting the power away from the party-state to the society-economy nexus (Table 1).

Moreover, the marketization of politics not only led to serious debates about the possible negative effects on democratization, but also increased the involvement of business elites in the political process. Since 2000, Taiwan's political environment has carried several of the common features of a post-democratic society. That is, there has been an overemphasis on elections, accelerating the process of commodification and rationalization of politics, reducing citizens to consumers, turning politicians into wholesalers, and producing ample opportunities for business elites to transform the state into a self-service outlet.

In more recent history, there has however been fierce resistance to such post-democratic developments. The Sunflower student movement, for example, took the lead in protesting against the KMT's policy of servicing the interests of big business and selling Taiwan's sovereignty to China behind closed doors in exchange for lucrative business deals.

In answer to the third question, Taiwan has entered an epoch of reflexive modernization—an era characterized by the fact that society increasingly has to deal with the side-effects of modernization and globalization. Like in any other contemporary democracy, politicians in Taiwan fell victim to the neo-liberal belief that economic growth could solve those problems and intensified their cooperation with business conglomerates.

The new state-business alliance has however worsened the economic conditions of lower income groups and the middle class while benefitting the rich. Thus, there is great potential for the rise of the so-called *Wutbürger*, or enraged citizens, to challenge the current political conditions. Apart from the Sunflower student movement, enraged citizens significantly contributed to the success of the almost unknown Han Kuo-yu in the 2018 mayoral election in Kaoshiung.

Although both groups emerged in protest of government policies, their motives differ considerably. The first took to the streets to defend Taiwan's democracy and sovereignty, whereas the latter was largely driven by concerns about personal economic prosperity. Han's promises and controversial attacks on his opponents have gained popularity among substantial portions of the population, while critics compare him with Donald Trump and thus see in him and his supporters a threat to democracy. Taiwan's media constitutes a further caveat. It is often described as partisan, sensational, irresponsible and driven by commercial interests with substantial parts of it owned by pro-China business groups.

In answer to the fourth question, Taiwan like any other advanced democracy is exposed to the risks of becoming a post-democratic state, i.e., falling victim to the neo-liberal logic of politics, eventually causing society to surrender its democratic rights to a small group of politico-economic elites. There are, however, two positive political constellations that may offer ample opportunities for comprehensive and inclusive public participation in the shaping of the island republic's political conditions.

First, there is the sovereignty-related force that makes democracy the only viable option. That is, in order to protect its sovereignty against China's irredentism, Taiwan must demonstrate its "democraticness" to the world. As such, domestic political adversaries have been compelled to contest their differences (e.g., national identity) within democratic procedures. Neither the KMT nor the DPP could use force against one another or stage a coup d'état without running the risk of Chinese military intervention.

What has been at play here is what Chantal Mouffe termed *agonistic politics*.¹⁰⁵ Agonistic politics accepts the existence of conflicts within society and believes that the aim of democratic politics is not to eliminate antagonism but to transform it into struggles between adversaries (*agonism*). Since different narratives of the nation were openly contested instead of being forcefully marginalized, the public discourse on national identity *repoliticized* the public political realm after decades of authoritarian rule.

Second, this *repoliticization* led to a process of internalization of democratic values and norms among substantial proportions of the population, especially among the younger urban people. Since those citizens with the lowest support levels for democratic governance belong to the older generations, further democratic development is likely.

The diametrically different notion of democratic governance that exists within the population constitutes not only a generational conflict but also encapsulates the ongoing conflict between the advocates of Taiwanese and Chinese nationalism. The average supporter of Taiwanese nationalism exhibits high levels of intrinsic democratic regime support and shares the conviction that an independent Taiwanese nation-state can only be achieved through democratic governance. The right of self-determination is the guiding principle here.

Advocates of Chinese nationalism, on the other hand, believe that the question of democratization is not about advancing the universality of political rights and civil liberties, but about the use of state power. Democracy is seen here as a means of ensuring political and social stability. The popularized "division" over national identity is believed to justify a relativization of liberal democratic principles as previously exercised by the Ma government.

Survey results (Table 2), however, fail to support the claim of a polarized society with regard to national identity/notions of democratic governance.¹⁰⁶

Being aware of the fact that support for the pragmatic Chinese nationalist notion of democratic governance is waning, former President Ma Ying-jeou (as well as presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu) tried to depoliticize the issue of national identity by appealing to common economic interests and turning them into salient issues of national identification.

The new mode of national identification brought about a rapprochement with Beijing, followed by a wave of *econophoria* with decreasing commitment to democratic governance. In light of the increasingly aggressive Chinese irredentism, the *depoliticization* attempt was however short lived with Tsai Ying-wen resuming the process of *repoliticization* by reopening the public debate about national identity, sovereignty, and the island's right of self-determination.

To conclude, Taiwan's defensive democratization has brought about multiple avenues for comprehensive and inclusive public participation in the shaping of Taiwan's political conditions.

NOTES

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