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THE PROSPECT OF TAIWAN -TIBET TIES UNDER THE NEW GOVERNMENT OF DPP

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Taiwan's presidential election of 2016 resulted in the emergence of Ms. Tsai Ing-wen, belonging to the independence inclined Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), being triumphant. She won 56 percent of the votes defeating Eric Chu, the president of the Nationalist Kuomintang party (KMT), who won thirty one percent of vote. Moreover, the DPP also won majority of seats in the Taiwan's parliament as it won 68 out of 113 seats. The new government under DPP will take over as the incumbent KMT's Ma Ying-jeou resigns on May 20, 2016 after eight long years in power. The victory of DPP with comfortable majority reflects that many residents of Taiwan identify themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese, thus it could be considered as an expression of Taiwanese identity. It is also indicative of the fact that there is broad political support for de facto self rule, if not formal independence. Growing proximity between Taiwan and China under the KMT government has not been received well by the Taiwanese rather they perceive it as a grave threat to the status quo, irrespective of the fact that the KMT position has been that unification is possible only after China becomes a

democracy which respects the rule of law and the human rights of its citizens.¹

After the victory of DPP, Ms Tsai Ing-wen stated her campaign pledge to "build a consistent, predictable and sustainable cross-strait relationship." She mentioned categorically that "both sides of the strait have a responsibility to find mutually acceptable means of interaction that are based on dignity and reciprocity. We must ensure that no provocations or accidents take place".²

As the DPP is set to form the new government in mid 2016, the pertinent question arises as to how the Taiwan-Tibet ties would unfold under the new government. Taiwan-Tibet relations have undergone twists and turns in the past. Both of them were victims of Maoist design, but their paths diverge as the Tibetans have firmly believed in their independent status from China; on the other hand, Taipei, which claimed to be China's sole legitimate government, regarded Tibet as inalienable part of China. Hence they embarked on separate paths. Taiwan-Tibet relations prior to 1990s have been almost non-existent.



The prime irritant in the relationship has been the role played by Taiwan's Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission (MTAC). The commission was created in 1928 when the Republic of China government under the Kuomintang was in power to deal with Mongolian and Tibetan affairs. The Tibetans in exile have always raised their concerns that the MTAC had for a long time been funding conflicts and discords in the Tibetan community. In 1994 a joint declaration was signed between the members of MTAC and Chushi Gangdruk, a Tibetan guerrilla organisation that had fought the communists. By the terms of the agreement, the Taiwanese are reported to have promised that once China is "unified under a free, democratic system", they would guarantee "rights of self-governance for Tibet" and recognise the Dalai Lama as "the political and religious leader of the Tibetan people." The Tibetan leadership in exile were probably concerned about an agreement of such a nature as it not only questions the authority of the exile government to represent the Tibetans in exile, but also it has potential to generate a trend of similar nature of agreements either with China or with Taiwan. Not only a referendum was conducted on this matter, it also led to a formation of a new Chushi Gangdruk which condemned "Taiwan government's nefarious activities in Tibetan community."³

However, in 1990s, Taiwan's relations with Tibet underwent a shift mainly driven by the process of democratisation and nativisation within Taiwan's internal politics. The KMT underwent

radical reforms, particularly after the accession of the native Lee Teng-hui as the Taiwanese President. He publicly expressed his admiration for the Dalai Lama and invited the latter to Taiwan as early as 1993.⁴ Under Lee's presidency, not only Taiwan-Tibet relations normalised but also witnessed the 14th Dalai Lama's first visit to Taiwan in 1997. Lee had met the Dalai Lama at the Presidential Palace in Taipei. Following the first visit, the Dalai Lama's second visit occurred in 2001 under the tenure of President Chen Shui-bian (DPP) and third one was in 2009 during the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (KMT). His visits to Taiwan have been successful. Soon after his first visit to Taiwan, the 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama Religious and Cultural Foundation' was established in Taipei. President Chen Shui-bian met the Dalai Lama twice during his visit to Taiwan in 2001 to discuss the areas of cooperation.

In 2003, Taiwan established Tibet-Taiwan Exchange Foundation, although this foundation was labelled as non-governmental agency primarily to oversee relations with Tibetans in exile, but President Chen Shui-bian presided over the launch of the foundation. The Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, however, kept a distance from the foundation mainly owing to ongoing talks with Beijing on an annual basis.⁵

With regard to the future prospects of Taiwan-Tibet ties after the accession of Ms. Tsai Ing-wen into power, many analysts were optimistically certain that Taiwan's relations with Tibet will undergo positive change, however, what remains

uncertain as of now is the degree of the change. This anticipation is further bolstered by the fact that the DPP is in majority in Taiwan's parliament too. It is quite certain that DPP-led government would dissolve the MTAC as it had planned to do so earlier, however, attributing to its fall from power in the 2008 election to KMT it couldn't materialize. I-Chung Li, the director of the DPP's office in Washington, stated his party's position on the Tibet issue as "we respect whatever the Tibetan people decide." This can be understood to exhibit the Party's position on Tibet as Tibet is not part of China unless it chooses to be.⁶

Since the normalisation of relations between Taiwan and Tibet, Tibet issue and Tibetan Buddhism have wide spread support and appeal respectively among Taiwanese, irrespective of the party in power, as stated by the representative of Tibetan government in Taiwan.⁷ In 2012, a Tibetan minister from Dharamsala addressed a group consisting of MPs, NGO community and students about the situation in Tibet in Taiwan's parliament house and it was the first time that a Tibetan minister addressed members of the Taiwanese parliament.⁸ Hence, the engagements between Taiwan and Tibetan government in exile is well underway, coupled by anticipations about the further development of the relations under the upcoming presidency of Ms. Tsai Ing-wen. She has been supportive of the Tibet issue personally; during the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan in 2009, she had separately met him twice. The relevance of the Tibet issue can be underscored from the fact that the 2008

uprising in Tibet and subsequent Chinese measures have been extensively covered during the election campaign in Taiwan in 2008. For instance, DPP had used the phrase with reference to unfolding developments in Tibet during that time as "Today's Tibet, Tomorrow's Taiwan".⁹ In March 2015, a 12 member Taiwan delegation had an audience with the Dalai Lama during which, they presented him an invitation from 15 Taiwanese civic organisations, to which the Dalai Lama had consented.¹⁰ Hence the Dalai Lama's fourth visit to Taiwan appears to be in the pipeline. As Taiwanese have mandated DPP's government in the recent election result, certain positive changes on the Taiwan-Tibet front are expected.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ China warns of challenges to cross-strait relations following Taiwan election results, www.tibetanreview.net/china-warns-of-challenges-to-cross-strait-relation, January 19, 2016, accessed on January 25, 2016.

² *ibid*

³ Tsering Chonzom Bhutia, Tibet, Taiwan and China- A Complex Nexus, thediplomat.com/2015/11/tibet-taiwan-and-china-a-complex-nexus/, November 24, 2015, accessed on January 25, 2016, p. 3

⁴ Tsering Namgyal, Taiwan and Tibet, *Harvard Asia Pacific Review*, Summer Issue, 2003, p. 72

⁵ Chonzom, n. 3, p. 3

⁶ Jim Mann, Taiwan-Tibet Issue: An Irritant to China, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/may/03/news/mn>, May 03, 2000, accessed on January 26, 2016.

⁷ Taiwan Elections: The Drift Away From China, www.voatibetanenglish.com/media/video/3147418.html, January 15, 2016, accessed on January 25, 2016.

⁸ Exile Tibetan Minister Addresses MPs in Taipei, *Tibetan Review*, July-September 2012, p. 16.

⁹ Taiwan Elections: The Drift Away From China, n. 7,

¹⁰ Chonzom, n. 3, p. 4

