Democratic Transition and Consolidation in Taiwan

By Shelley Rigger

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Abstract
Taiwan’s democratic transition began with baby-step reforms in the late 1970s, accelerated through the 1980s, and reached its apex with the first direct presidential election in 1996. In the sixteen years since that watershed event, Taiwan’s democracy has moved toward consolidation, but the pace of its forward progress has slowed. Although Taiwan shows no sign of returning to the authoritarianism of its past, institutionalizing the gains achieved during the transition has not always been easy. And if backsliding is unlikely, it is not inconceivable that Taiwan might be dragged into a new form of nondemocratic politics imposed by Beijing. Taiwan and its friends must continue to defend its political system energetically lest Taiwan lose its ability to resist the pressures that threaten its democracy.

Democratization and Consolidation
Political scientists who study democratization typically differentiate two phases in the democratization process: transition and consolidation. A democratic transition occurs when a country replaces authoritarian institutions and practices with democratic ones. It is not always easy to determine unequivocally when that threshold has passed, but the installation of a government in which, as Samuel P. Huntington puts it, the “most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote” is a relatively clear and definitive standard that has won the endorsement of many political scientists.¹ So, for example, while experts may differ about whether Taiwan was a democracy in 1991, when most but not all decision makers were chosen in multiparty elections, there is no question that it was democratic by 1996, when the last nonelective position—the presidency—was subjected to direct popular election for the first time.

The concept of consolidation—the idea that a democracy is no longer becoming democratic but being democratic—is even more contested than democratization. It is hard to define—many definitions include an “I know it when I see it” vagueness—and even harder to measure. Some political scientists even question the utility of democratic consolidation as a concept because, they argue, it treats democracy as a destination rather than a process. In the critics’ view, consolidation implies that, for some countries, democracy is a permanent condition that cannot
change, while for others—those that have not yet consolidated—it is a temporary trait. They caution that democracy can fail even in well-established democracies, and the discourse of consolidation may produce a false confidence that obscures the common struggles of all democratic states, young and old.

With that caveat, I would argue that consolidation is a useful analytical category because history suggests democracies are at their most fragile when they are new. Consolidation describes the process by which they build resilience and durability over time. The founding election that moves a nation from the nondemocratic category into the democratic is hardly the end of the process. If democracy is to survive to the next election, institutions need to be strengthened, and the public and politicians need to accept that they can best protect and advance their interests by participating in fair competition—as opposed to seeking a return to a political process that allows them to force their will on others.

In Juan Linz’s catchy summation, for consolidation to be achieved, “democracy must be seen as ‘the only game in town.’” Huntington recommends a more mechanistic definition: the “second turnover,” an election in which political power changes hands for the second time. In his book Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation, Larry Diamond offers a definition that is thick enough to capture Linz’s insight but technical enough to be measured. He writes, “Democracy can be consolidated only when no significant collective actors challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions or regularly violate its constitutional norms, procedures, and laws. Any democracy will have its share of cranks, extremists, and rejectionists. . . . If democracy is to be consolidated, however, these antidemocrats must be truly marginal. There must be no ‘politically significant’ antisystem (disloyal) parties or organizations.” Diamond further develops indicators of consolidation across three levels—elites, organizations, and the mass public—and two dimensions—norms, and beliefs and behavior. Only when mainstream actors at all three levels accept and act in accordance with democratic norms can a country claim to have achieved consolidation.

The alternative to consolidation typically is assumed to be a return to authoritarianism—a phenomenon Huntington characterizes as a “reverse wave.” More often we speak of
“backsliding”—slipping backward toward the predemocratic authoritarian past. Backsliding is certainly a danger for many young democracies, but it is not the only one. A new, unprecedented form of authoritarianism also can be adopted or imposed from inside or outside a state.

Mission Accomplished? Democratization and Consolidation in Taiwan

The roots of Taiwan’s contemporary democratic system lie in the early twentieth century when activists in mainland China and Taiwan, at that time a colony of Japan, began imagining a democratic future for their respective lands. The institutional embodiment of that future took shape when the Republic of China (ROC) was founded on the mainland. The constitution the ROC used to govern Taiwan after the Japanese surrendered its colony to the ROC in 1945 was democratic, even though the regime that took power that year was not. That constitution guaranteed civil rights and liberties and provided for elected governments at all levels, but the regime suspended many of its democratic provisions during the decades of war that racked China throughout the early twentieth century. The authoritarian ruling style the ROC developed on the mainland and transferred to Taiwan was a deviation from its own values and structures; its leaders justified that contradiction on the grounds of national emergency. In other words, while the ROC took decades to live up to its democratic promise, that promise was built into its ideology and its institutions.

In the 1950s, a handful of prominent intellectuals who had moved with the Kuomintang-led (KMT) ROC government to Taiwan when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized the mainland began agitating for democracy, even making common cause with Taiwan-born politicians who shared their agenda. Those early reform efforts were crushed, but they focused renewed attention on the ROC’s democratic promise. By the early 1970s, the ROC government’s international position had deteriorated significantly, weakening the KMT-led regime’s claim to legitimacy. In conjunction with that trend, the share of Taiwanese who accepted the ruling party’s rationale for authoritarianism—the belief that wrestling the mainland away from the Communists was a sacred mission—was in sharp decline. A new reform movement began to coalesce, one that brought together prodemocracy intellectuals and local politicians seeking to expand their sphere of influence beyond the grassroots level.
By the early 1980s, Taiwan’s democratic movement enjoyed strong momentum. When the government used political prosecutions to suppress the movement in 1979, the result was even stronger popular support for the democracy activists. In 1986, the opposition formed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and although martial law provisions in effect since the 1940s made that action illegal, they were not punished. Within a year, the regime lifted martial law. Over the subsequent decade, restrictions on the democratic governance promised in the ROC constitution melted away one after another. Ultimately, the constitution itself became a target for reform: the Taiwanese amended it several times in the 1990s to enhance Taiwan’s democracy, most notably by allowing direct election of the president.

While Taiwan’s democratic transition ended sixteen years ago, its democratic consolidation is still underway. It passed Huntington’s second turnover test in 2008, and its performance is consistent with Diamond’s measures, too: there is no evidence that any significant constituency in Taiwan desires a return to the nondemocratic past. Nonetheless, its political institutions continue evolving in order to deepen and sustain democratic politics, suggesting that consolidation is still underway.

The status of its consolidation process suggests Taiwan is unlikely to backslide into authoritarianism, but not all the news is good. At least two disquieting trends require our attention. First, the rate of progress toward democratic deepening has slowed, both in the institutional sense and in the popular views of democracy. Second, Taiwan’s democracy faces a significant external threat: Beijing’s determination to integrate Taiwan into the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This latter danger raises the possibility that even if Taiwan is not in danger of backsliding toward its authoritarian past, it could slide (or be dragged) into a new form of authoritarianism in the future. That possibility is remote, but not inconceivable.

**Taiwan’s Continuing Progress toward Consolidation**

One way to recognize backsliding in Taiwan’s democracy is to look for signs that the authoritarian practices that characterized the prereform era are returning. The most significant features of Taiwan’s authoritarian system included domination of political competition by a single party, political institutions that were not accountable to the public, a politicized military
and judiciary, and civil liberties and rights that were not secure or protected. We can check these indicators for evidence of whether Taiwan’s democracy is losing steam.

Single-Party Politics

Before 1986, Taiwan had only one political party capable of influencing government policy, the KMT or Nationalist Party. The KMT allowed two small parties, the China Youth Party and the China Democratic Socialist Party, but their sole function was to support the fiction that the ROC had a multiparty system. In 1986, the DPP was founded and quickly became the preferred party of about 40 percent of Taiwan’s voters. The DPP’s founding goals were to bring about Taiwan’s democratization and to attain full political participation for the island’s majority, the so-called native Taiwanese who had been on the island for generations, but were overshadowed politically by the much smaller number of mainlanders who arrived after Japanese colonization ended.

In 1991, the DPP added a more controversial demand to its agenda when it called for Taiwan’s independence. While some in the DPP were committed to independence as a matter of ideology, for many, independence was desirable because it would undercut the KMT’s insistence on unification as a national mission. Without the imperative of unification, there would be no reason to afford mainlanders—the representatives of the “rest of China”—special privileges and disproportionate access to political power. In other words, independence was a means to the DPP’s primary ends: democracy and ethnic equality.

DPP leaders quickly realized that while democratization and ethnic justice were popular causes that could build support in the electorate, independence was a bridge too far for most voters. When DPP candidates were most strongly associated with independence—especially in 1991 and 1996—the party’s vote share declined. After a particularly poor showing in the first presidential election, the DPP turned away from its independence platform. Instead, DPP leaders increasingly stressed an approach first articulated in 1993: Taiwan did not need to declare independence because it was independent already, albeit under the name Republic of China. In 1999, the party passed a resolution making this formulation its official stance. In response, the most devoted independence supporters broke with the party to form the Taiwan Independence Party.
The KMT also split in the early 1990s. Democratization made electoral success an ever more important source of legitimacy and power for the ruling party. To ensure its popularity, KMT boss Lee Teng-hui softened his party’s stance on unification. He encouraged KMT followers to join the flourishing Taiwan identity movement, even to the point of coining the phrase “New Taiwanese” to describe mainlanders whose long residence on the island had shifted their loyalty from the Chinese mainland to their island home. But his move away from orthodoxy was controversial, and in 1993 the party’s conservative wing split off to form the Chinese New Party.

In the wake of the KMT candidate’s defeat in the 2000 presidential election, the party split again. Fans of politician James Soong formed the People First Party (PFP), while hardcore Lee Teng-hui supporters founded the Taiwan Solidarity Union after their hero quit the KMT.

In short, Taiwan’s democratic era saw the birth of several politically significant parties. These parties have not always done well—the Taiwan Independence Party, Taiwan Solidarity Union, and Chinese New Party never won more than a handful of legislative seats—but the DPP and PFP, have at times acted as significant checks on KMT power, and from 2000 to 2008 the DPP held the presidential office. The proliferation of parties proves that Taiwan’s political system is open to different points of view, but instability in the party system is a source of concern for some observers. The main source of concern is that the KMT—which seamlessly transitioned from unchallenged ruling party to leading player in a multiparty system—might regain its dominant position by either overwhelming the opposition or fragmenting it.

The country’s history as a single-party pseudodemocracy makes analysts quick to sound the alarm about a return to one-party dominance. After the KMT’s disastrous losses in 2000 and 2001, many observers feared it was on the verge of imploding. Then, when the DPP won barely a fourth of the legislative seats and only 42 percent of the presidential votes in 2008, the cry went out that it was about to collapse. In both cases, however, the parties righted themselves. The KMT was able to rebuild its legislative majority and ended up reabsorbing many of the PFP insurgents. In 2008, its presidential candidate won a whopping 58 percent of the vote. The DPP, for its part, has made steady progress toward recovering the ground it lost in 2008, winning a number of by-elections and recovering its standing in public opinion polls. Despite her eventual
loss to President Ma, DPP presidential candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, put up a strong fight in the run-up to the January 2012 election.

Another possible path back to dominant-party rule would be an opposition too fragmented to challenge the one remaining large party (most likely the KMT). Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party retained a majority in its legislature for decades using just this strategy. For decades, Taiwan and Japan used a multimember voting system that allowed candidates with limited, but enthusiastic, support to win seats. The system encouraged the Chinese New Party, PFP, Taiwan Independence Party, Taiwan Solidarity Union, and other small parties to split from the KMT and DPP and strike out on their own.

In 2005, the two main parties pushed through electoral reforms that make it nearly impossible for third parties to win seats in the national legislature. The new rules combine plurality elections with a smaller number of seats filled by proportional representation. The 2008 legislative elections used the new system, with the result that only the KMT and DPP (and a handful of independent candidates) captured any seats. The new rules hurt the DPP (which in the past was able to win seats by finishing second or third in many districts), but they hurt the small parties even more. The new rules strengthened the two-party system and gave voters a clear choice between two well-differentiated alternatives—a situation that was often not the case under the old rules. In short, the reforms make a return to single-party politics highly unlikely.

**Government Accountability**

The possibility of being thrown out of office is, at least in theory, the sine qua non of democratic accountability. During the authoritarian period Taiwan’s voters had little leverage to hold national officials accountable for their actions. Presidents were selected by an unelected National Assembly; Taiwan’s first four postwar presidents were all chosen by top KMT leaders and rubber-stamped by the National Assembly. The island’s legislature was subjected to direct election only in 1992. Since the democratic transition, incumbents and party leaders have been forced to consider their standing with the public, as elections have been highly competitive for most positions. Still, amendments to the ROC constitution adopted in the 1990s created significant obstacles to accountability. At its inception, the ROC constitution employed a
parliamentary design that gave authority over domestic policy to a premier elected by the legislature. But the distortions of the authoritarian era concentrated more and more power in the hands of the president; giving the presidency the popular mandate of direct election added even more to its authority.

The constitutional amendments that shifted power toward the presidential office changed the legislature’s role very little, weakening the accountability mechanisms so important to democratic functioning. When one party controls both the presidency and the legislature, that party enjoys unchecked power. Using a no confidence vote to unseat an unpopular government is an empty weapon in Taiwan because the president serves a fixed term. The situation is even worse in periods of divided government. The legislature can remove the premier in a vote of no confidence, but it cannot remove the president (the real locus of power) and has no right to reject the president’s choice of a new premier. In other words, the vote of no confidence punishes the legislators but does little to check the president. As Chen Shui-bian put it early in his second presidential term, “the design of the current constitution is laden with contradictions and incompatibilities, [and] its actual implementation is also morbidly inefficient.”

These limitations are visible to the public as an alternation between unchecked power and infuriating gridlock. During the Chen administration—when the presidency was held by the DPP and the legislature was KMT-controlled—voters could be forgiven for wondering whether their government was capable of accomplishing anything. The paralysis was quite unnerving given the magnitude of the problems facing Taiwan at the time. Under Chen’s successor, Ma Ying-jeou, the opposite complaint is often heard: where are the checks on the ruling party’s power? Ma’s party holds just under three-quarters of the legislative seats. Interestingly, the legislature has not been the rubber stamp for Ma’s ideas those numbers would suggest; instead the president has faced significant resistance to many of his policies within his own party. That surprising fact has alleviated concerns about accountability to some extent, since it suggests that legislators recognize that satisfying their constituents is more important than following the party line to the letter. Even so, the underlying constitutional problems will resurface when voters next elect a divided government.
Military Depoliticization

Under the KMT’s single-party authoritarianism, the ROC armed forces were partisan and politicized, both on the mainland and after the retreat to Taiwan. A system of political commissars allowed the KMT to monopolize the political education of conscripts and recruits, and promotion into the higher ranks was reserved for those loyal to the party. In addition, the military played a large role in domestic security and law enforcement. Depoliticizing the military was an important goal of Taiwan’s democratic transition and consolidation—not as sexy or visible a goal as direct presidential elections or legislative activism, but equally important.

Military depoliticization (or as the Taiwanese phrase it, nationalization, guojiahua) began under Lee Teng-hui. From the late 1980s, civilian authorities steadily increased their supremacy over the military.⁵ Thanks to those reforms, active-duty military personnel no longer hold government positions, the top military official (the chief of the General Staff) no longer reports directly to the president, military commissars no longer indoctrinate Taiwanese students, and the military no longer participates in law enforcement. In 2000, Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan passed a National Defense Law that consolidated the legislature’s oversight of the military, assuring democratic control over the armed forces.

Chen Shui-bian’s presidency tested those reforms. For decades, the ROC military was staffed disproportionately by mainlanders and pro-unification KMT loyalists. When Chen, a Taiwanese-identified, anti-unification DPP firebrand, was elected, observers in Taiwan and the United States speculated that it might be difficult for him to control the military. As it turned out, civil-military relations changed very little from the Lee presidency to the Chen administration. Reforms institutionalizing civilian authority surely played a role, as did generational turnover in the officer corps, but Chen’s approach to managing military affairs mattered, too. Although in his days as a legislator Chen had been a frequent critic of the military, once he became president he adopted a hands-off approach, interfering with the military far less than his predecessor. In the end, Chen’s presidency offered reassuring evidence that the military’s depoliticization was real and lasting.

Judicial Independence and Civil Rights
In the authoritarian period, the ROC’s judiciary collaborated with other government institutions to protect and uphold the KMT’s monopoly on power. The top-down design of the judicial system made it easy to punish court officials who failed to use their authority “appropriately.”

During the democratic transition, the judicial system was reformed to give judges more independence from their superiors. Courts have absorbed a steady stream of reforms, both structural and doctrinal, since the late 1980s. A proposal currently under consideration would decentralize judicial authority even further by introducing a partial-jury system.

These efforts to build a fair, independent judiciary that respects and protects citizens’ rights have, in the view of many observers, fallen short. Earlier this year, Taiwan’s legislature took up a bill to facilitate the removal of judges behaving improperly. While some international observers saw the measure as a setback for judicial independence, many Taiwanese believe it is high time to reign in judges and prosecutors. In recent years, accusations of politically motivated prosecution and prosecutorial misconduct have proliferated. While the Chen administration’s record on this front was far from perfect (prosecutors’ decision to charge presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou with corruption just months before the election raised many eyebrows), the Ma administration has come under even stronger censure for how it is treating Chen and others accused of corruption during his presidency.

A series of open letters from foreign scholars and journalists to Ma detail the criticisms. The first of these, published in November 2008, suggested Chen and his allies had been treated unusually harshly because they were the president’s political opponents. Another open letter, published in the *Taipei Times* on April 11, 2011, defended Chen-era individuals under investigation for mishandling documents. According to the letter’s signatories, “Obviously, in a democracy there is a need to uphold the law, but this needs to be done fairly and evenhandedly, without any hint of abuse of power. In our view, this move by your government is seriously lacking on both counts. It appears to be an attempt to use the Control Yuan and judicial system for political ends, in an effort to appear ‘legal’ and avoid criticism by foreign governments and human rights groups.”
Even Ma’s friend and mentor, New York University law professor Jerome Cohen, has questioned his protégé’s record on civil rights. Cohen has published a number of columns calling attention to the problems in the Chen-linked corruption cases and encouraging Ma to take a firm hand against judicial misconduct. Writing about police actions to control demonstrators during a visit by Beijing’s top Taiwan policy official in 2008, Cohen characterized some police actions as “brutality.” He also said efforts to shield the Chinese official from political speech that might offend him—such as the display of ROC and Tibetan flags along his motorcade route and at public events—“went beyond the limits of a free society.” While he was careful not to judge prosecutors’ actions without full information, he urged Ma to do a better job insulating the judicial system from politics and protecting its integrity and reputation.7

**Popular Perceptions of Taiwan’s Democracy**

Taiwan’s democratic wave crested in 2000 when the opposition party captured the presidency. Since then, the momentum of change has slowed, and in some respects, the wave may even have receded. Constitutional reforms aimed at rationalizing the distribution of power between the legislative and executive functions are necessary, but there is little enthusiasm in Taiwan for the arduous task of constitutional amendment—especially now, when unified government disguises the depth of the problem. The worst abuses of a politicized judiciary have been eliminated, but not all judicial officials have internalized the ethical standards necessary for democratic consolidation. The 2008 electoral reforms reinforce a two-party system that will improve government efficiency and give voters clear ideological and policy alternatives, but that also will reduce the representation of minority viewpoints. Economically, Taiwan has reached a plateau. It is no longer a “little tiger,” but fully grown, with the whole panoply of challenges that face the world’s advanced industrial economies. The recessions in 2001 and 2008 hit Taiwan hard, but it recovered faster and stronger than most of its competitors, thanks in large part to budding ties to its fast-growing neighbor. But here, too, political development matters: Taiwanese are looking to their government to produce not only aggregate growth, but distributional patterns that spread the benefits of growth evenly in society. Responsive institutions are necessary to translate voters’ preferences into effective policies.
In short, Taiwan’s democratic consolidation is proceeding, but it is far from perfect. As the worst abuses of the authoritarian era fade into the past, additional reforms become more difficult, both because reform fatigue allows citizens and politicians to imagine that “it ain’t that broke, so don’t fix it” and because entrenched interests are getting better at protecting their oxen from being gored. Surveys suggest that Taiwan’s citizens are familiar with both the promise and the shortcomings of their democracy—with disquieting results. Tables 1 and 2 suggest that many Taiwanese are deeply worried about the country’s democratic development. While almost no one thinks Taiwan is not a democracy, more than 40 percent believe it is a democracy with major problems. Nearly half are dissatisfied with the way their democracy works.

**Table 1. How much of a democracy is Taiwan today?**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A full democracy</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A democracy with minor problems</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A democracy with major problems</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a democracy</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not total to 100 because “Don’t know” and “Refuse to answer” are not included.

**Table 2. Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Taiwan today?**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly satisfied</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very satisfied</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all satisfied</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not total to 100 because “Don’t know” and “Refuse to answer” are not included.

Political scientists often soften findings of this sort with the comforting thought that citizens can be very dissatisfied with their particular democracy while still valuing democracy itself. Dissatisfaction with the performance of one’s democratic government could indicate a desire for a better democracy, not an inclination to backslide toward authoritarianism. On this front, table 3 offers only modest reassurance. Half—but only half—of Taiwanese believe democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. Close to one in five believe that an authoritarian
system might be better under certain circumstances. If the government’s performance does not improve, support for democracy in principle could deteriorate even further. Still, many indicators suggest democratic values are strong in Taiwan. Turnout for elections routinely exceeds 75 percent of eligible voters; the percentage of Taiwanese who favor a political party is also increasing.

Table 3. Desirability of Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In some circumstances, an authoritarian regime—a dictatorship—can be</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preferable to a democratic system.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have.</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not total to 100 because “Don’t know” and “Refuse to answer” are not included.
Source: TEDS 2008. The question asks, “Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?” N=1,238.

Sliding Forward into Authoritarianism

Despite this mixed picture, Taiwan hardly seems on the verge of backsliding into its past authoritarian practices. There is, however, another disturbing possibility on the horizon: Taiwan’s democracy could be challenged from the outside, specifically from the PRC. China’s leaders have made it clear time and again that they will not be satisfied until Taiwan is meaningfully united with the PRC. They also have promised that Taiwan can retain “substantial autonomy” after unification. Some analysts interpret the latter promise to mean that unification will not impinge on Taiwan’s democracy. Others are more skeptical. It is hard to imagine how the PRC could integrate Taiwan politically without demanding major changes to its system. The CCP already faces demands for democratization from its own citizens; the existence of a fully democratic entity within the PRC would surely intensify that unwelcome pressure.

The “one country, two systems” formula under which Hong Kong was integrated into the PRC was designed as a model for Taiwan. Almost fifteen years into the Hong Kong experiment, democrats’ worst fears have not been confirmed. Residents of the former British colony still enjoy far more political, economic, and civil rights than other PRC citizens. But the very limited
democracy the British hastily put in place before their departure has not aged well. Pro-Beijing business interests are systematically overrepresented in the legislative council, and Beijing plays a key role in selecting Hong Kong’s top leaders. As a 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article put it, “Hong Kong’s eligible voters won’t have any say in the outcome of the next election, as the city’s leader is selected by a 1,200-member committee consisting mainly of people backed by Chinese authorities in Beijing. The current setup more or less guarantees that the winner will have China’s blessing.” Given the CCP’s record in Hong Kong (and the rest of China), it is easy to understand why many Taiwanese are skeptical about China’s autonomy promise.

Some observers worry that Taiwan will enter Beijing’s political orbit voluntarily. They see signs that the island is drifting toward unification. Restrictions on speech during PRC officials’ visits look like Taiwan may be trading civil liberties for China’s favor. Rules liberalizing travel between the two sides could increase the PRC’s leverage over the island. Private decisions to spend more time and invest more money on the mainland might help some Taiwanese become more accepting of PRC-style authoritarianism. The ROC military, too, has been criticized for lacking a clear intention to fend off unification. Spy scandals involving active-duty military and intelligence personnel, military officers moving to the mainland after retirement, declining military spending, and partisan debates over military budgets raise the possibility that Taiwan has lost its will to resist the mainland and its consciousness of who the enemy is (*diwo yishi*). Combined with dwindling confidence in Taiwan’s democracy, these trends are worrisome.

Still, the overwhelming opposition to unification expressed in every opinion poll taken in the past twenty years suggests that even if Taiwanese are happy to cooperate with mainland people for their mutual economic benefit, voluntary unification is a long way in the future. In the near term, the greatest threat to Taiwan’s democracy is a decision by the PRC to accelerate the unification process, even to the point of turning to force. If unification is coerced, preserving Taiwan’s democracy will be extremely difficult, as the unification process itself will violate Taiwan’s democratic spirit and institutions. It is hard to imagine how democracy could recover from such an event. Ultimately, the internal threats to Taiwan’s democracy are real, but manageable. It is the threat from outside—the threat of coerced unification—that poses the greatest danger and requires the most determined resistance. For democracy to continue to thrive
and consolidate, Taiwanese need support and encouragement to fix the internal problems that bedevil their democracy. They also need help resisting the external pressures that threaten their democratic achievements.
Acknowledgments

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Notes


3 Larry Diamond, Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 67.


