

Long Live Democracy

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Introduction

Grassroots political opposition to Kuomintang (KMT) rule in Taiwan gained momentum over the course of the 1970s, a tumultuous decade that began with the Republic of China's (ROC) loss of its United Nations seat and culminated in the Kaohsiung Incident of December 10, 1979. This opposition was driven, at least initially, by a native Taiwanese (本省人 *benshengren*) middle class, comprising intellectuals and students such as Kang Ning-hsiang 康寧祥 and Huang Hsin-chieh 黃信介, which did not identify with the "China" that the KMT claimed Taiwan was simply a province of. Despite or perhaps because of the KMT's cautious efforts at expanding *benshengren* political participation from the late 1960s onwards, the increasing number of persons associated with a new *dangwai* (黨外; "non-party" or "outside the party") movement pushed for further freedoms, contested elections, and demanded fundamental changes to the political structure.¹

Unsurprisingly, the state security apparatus pushed back. Premier Chiang Ching-kuo, who succeeded his father as President in 1978, supported limited Taiwanization, but was quite willing to crack down on activists and demonstrators. In 1977, in an early sign of *dangwai*'s popularity, candidates affiliated with the movement won 21 out of 77 seats in the Taiwan Provincial Assembly. But in Zhongli 中壢, a northwestern coastal city, elections for the local county magistrate were marred by voting irregularities. In response to what they perceived was the KMT's manipulation of the results, voters took

¹ The term *dangwai* was originally employed by a group of independent politicians in 1957 who contested local and provincial elections under the name "Dangwai Candidates' Alliance." Shelley Rigger, *Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 68.

to the streets in protest. They were met by police brutality and repression; two youths were killed, and the local police station was burned down by the protesters.

Notwithstanding the KMT's increasingly heavy-handed approach, dangwai forces gained momentum. On August 16, 1979, key dangwai figures launched the magazine *Meilidao* (Formosa), which crystallized and gave voice to their movement as a genuine threat to one-party rule. *Meilidao*, although short-lived, proved immensely popular. Its early issues sold out, its circulation quickly reached 100,000 subscribers, and branches of the publication were established throughout Taiwan. The political gatherings that the organizers convened attracted as many as a thousand supporters per meeting.

In response, the authorities began monitoring *Meilidao* meetings and sought to destabilize the dangwai movement by tapping its leaders' phones and leaking stories to the press about their private lives. Tensions between *Meilidao* and the state came to a head only four months later in the southern city of Kaohsiung. Huang Hsin-chieh, one of *Meilidao*'s editors and a member of the Legislative Yuan since 1969, applied for, but was denied, a permit to commemorate Human Rights Day in the city on December 10. That day, clashes broke out between the crowd that had gathered at a large traffic circle near the *Meilidao* offices and the military police. The KMT exploited the protests to crack down on *Meilidao*, arresting virtually all of its leaders in the days that followed. 33 prisoners were tried in court, and eight were charged with sedition, four of whom were affiliated with the magazine, including future Democratic Progressive Party VicePresident Lu Hsiu-lien 呂秀蓮 (Annette Lu).

The Kaohsiung Incident was a milestone in the history of democratization in Taiwan and the largest confrontation between the Taiwanese public and police since February 28, 1947. In its aftermath, although political opposition to the KMT became fragmented and increasingly cautious, protests against the party-state did not disappear. To the contrary, the 1980s were characterized by a more diverse range of grassroots demonstrations

that included workers, farmers, women, and environmentalists, who drove democratization and Taiwanization from below.

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Long Live Democracy: A *Dangwai* Political Commentary

In the past year, our country and society face a historical turning point. History is leading us towards hell, and history is also leading us towards paradise.

What course do we follow? The more than 18 million people of this beautiful island face a historical choice! Choose wisely. Choose with conviction.

This historical choice can lead us towards a winter of despair and can also lead us towards a spring of hope.

We are thus on the altar of history's trial!

One

Following the local elections in late 1977 and in the aftermath of the Zhongli Incident, a political movement for a new generation has surged forward with momentum and fuels the fervor for political participation shown by the people at the end of last year. In the thirty years of KMT rule in Taiwan, this demonstrates an exuberant desire for political participation by the great masses of the people. It is also a specific challenge by the 18 million people of Taiwan to the one-party dictatorship of the KMT in the past thirty years!

Inspired by the exuberant desire of the great masses of the people, we are this movement's mainstream dangwai force. In the course of events, we have launched two historically significant projects in these new circumstances:

1. By assisting and uniting all dangwai groups and candidates' electoral campaigns, we seek to overcome the KMT's thirty-year isolationist policy of divide and rule towards dangwai forces, thereby bringing about a great unity of dangwai forces.
2. In the realm of opinion and political views, we seek for the first time to broadly overcome the constraints created by all the various executive orders that the KMT has promulgated, and to directly appeal to democratic principles and the fundamental laws of our constitution. Based on these standards for criticism, we will fiercely call into question the legality and authority of the KMT government's many decrees and policies. This will challenge the legal perspective of the ruler that "having the power to govern leniently is sufficient to prove the validity of the law" [具有權力付之寬施，即足以證實法律之效力]!

This historical breakthrough signals that dangwai political forces have matured to the extent that they touch on fundamental political questions. Following the Free China magazine of a group of old Chinese liberals in the 1950s, dangwai forces are uniting yet again. The difference is that the clique of old Chinese liberals from the 1950s essentially split from the KMT. It was a group of Chinese liberals who had been vanquished on the mainland and were trying to lay down roots in another place. The great coming together of a new political movement last year is thus the great coming together of an awakened new generation that social changes in Taiwan over the past thirty years have given birth to!

The KMT's response to the development of this situation shows that, in its heart, the ruling consciousness of half a century of one-party dictatorship and a lingering fear from the Zhongli Incident have survived. Spontaneously, the vestigial memories of a 50-year old ruling style have done all they can, with all their strength, to try to impede the flourishing of the entire democratic movement.

But the KMT, which has consciously ignored the people and deviated from the masses for the past thirty years, is amazed to notice, in the course of the movement, that "the masses have suddenly become visible and are very firmly entrenched in the most

obvious parts of society.” In confronting this situation, the KMT is perplexed and helpless; it has no way of correctly appraising the foundations of the masses. Therefore, a democratizing consciousness that conforms with global trends and a governing ideology that seeks to maintain political power are struggling with and ripping at each other.

It is with this contradictory mindset of struggling, ripping, and hesitancy that the KMT meets the challenge from the new generation!

Questions

1. What was the Zhongli Incident? What was Free China magazine and how was it different from the dangwai movement?
2. How, based on both the document and the events that surrounded it, was late 1979 a watershed moment in Taiwanese history?
3. How did the KMT seek to limit political participation and curb dissent in Taiwan? How would you characterize the KMT’s political thinking in the late 1970s?