

Malcolm Cook

Poll result offers the chance for calm

The Australian

14 December 2004

1 - All-round Country, p. 13

We all can breathe a sigh of relief. Taiwan's legislative elections last Saturday, again, did not bolster the most strident voices for independence or trigger a Chinese military attack. Rather, the results have stalled Taiwan's political momentum towards independence and empowered the voices of pragmatic moderation.

This lull gives Taipei, Beijing, Washington, Canberra and others new latitude to revive the so-called cross-strait status quo and allow intense cross-strait economic integration more time to cool political heads on both sides.

After 12 months of non-stop campaigning in Taiwan and sabre-rattling from Beijing, Taiwan is back where it started. Chen Shui-bian was re-elected as president in March while his party, the DPP, remains the largest party in a legislature controlled by the KMT-led pan-blue alliance. Saturday's surprise results dashed the DPP-led pan-green alliance's hopes of gaining their first-ever legislative majority. Chen will face an opposition-controlled legislature for his full eight-year, two-term presidency.

Saturday basically was a rerun of the 2001 legislative elections. The pan-blue side opposed to Taiwan independence maintained its wafer-thin majority down from 115 to 114 seats of the 225-seat Legislative Yuan. The pan-green side led by the DPP now controls 101 seats, up from 100 in 2001. Swinging "independents" hold the remaining 10 seats. Pan-blue parties, as in 2001, won roughly 50 per cent of the votes cast, while the pan-greens, significantly, saw their share rise from 41 per cent to 46 per cent.

The KMT, which ruled Taiwan from 1949 to 2000, was the only real winner. It went from 68 to 79 seats and reversed its eight-year electoral losing streak that had led many to write it off. The KMT reaffirmed its position as one of Taiwan's two main centrist parties and as the voice for Taiwan's "status quo". The biggest losers were the more extreme parties. The pan-blue PFP party espousing eventual reunification with China lost 12 of its 46 seats. On the pan-green side, the TSU party, campaigning for immediate Taiwan independence, lost one of its 13 seats falling well short of its goal of 20 seats. The DPP only won two new seats for a total of 89.

Saturday's results reaffirm that both reunification with China and official separation from China are not democratically feasible in Taiwan. The KMT won by promising to support Taiwan's present ambiguous political status, while the DPP failed to make expected inroads by threatening to change it and push Taiwan towards independence. The KMT won by reflecting voters' pragmatic, centrist leanings. The DPP scared off voters as it fretted over illusory gains by the TSU and promoted a radical ideal.

Chen is now in the domestic political hot seat. Saturday's results may help him in his factional fight within the DPP against "deeper green" factions pushing for independence and a deep green presidential candidate in 2008. However, the KMT's success running the line, echoing Beijing, that Chen is a dangerous manipulator risking Taiwan for his personal independence dream puts the president under new domestic pressure to take more assertive bipartisan steps towards a new detente with China.

If Chen does not, the DPP may suffer in the next legislative election. It may even lose the 2008 presidential election without the charismatic Chen and against one of the KMT's young, popular leaders rather than the wooden Lien Chan.

For the first time in roughly a decade, domestic political pressures in Taiwan are in tune with longstanding consistent pressures on Taipei from Washington and others against independence and in favour of a credible, Taiwan-initiated offer for new cross-strait talks.

Washington, Canberra and others should take advantage of this by encouraging Chen, as a self-interested politician and party leader, to mute his constitutional reform agenda and develop a more acceptable, bipartisan approach to cross-strait relations. At the same time, Washington, Canberra and others should encourage Beijing to drop its policy of simply castigating President Chen and hoping that he and the DPP will fade away. Saturday's results chastened the DPP and redeemed the KMT.

But the DPP and the pan-green alliance continue to grow in popularity. Saturday opened a window of opportunity to promote a cross-strait detente. We should not let it close.