



China, Mongolia, and Taiwan

GOVERNMENT

Democracy Comes to Taiwan

For more than 40 years, the anti-communist Chinese who escaped from mainland China in 1949 controlled the island of Taiwan and the Taiwanese people. Today, however, Taiwan has become one of Asia's most stable democracies. A longtime observer of Taiwan and a specialist in Asian affairs explains how this change came about.

“You’re a garbage heap!” cried the legislator. “You’re the fattest cockroach feeding on the garbage!” his political opponent [foe] shouted. It was but one moment in a session of the Li-fa Yuan, the highest lawmaking body of Taiwan, characterized by shouting and bloody brawls that have sent at least three parliamentarians [members of the legislature] to the hospital. . . .

Only a few years ago such an exchange in the . . . halls of the Taiwan congress would have been unthinkable. Now it symbolizes a sea change in the government and politics of Taiwan—the first prosperous, stable democracy in the history of the Chinese people. . . .

But Taiwan could hardly have traveled a more tortuous [winding] road to reach its success. In 1949 China fell to the communists. The battered army of Nationalist Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek fled to China’s offshore possessions with two million refugees. . . . Chiang’s followers maintained that they would once again rule one China under the Nationalist flag. They made Taipei, Taiwan’s largest city, their capital-in-exile until they could regroup and recapture the mainland. Their chances for achieving reunification seemed to wane [get smaller] with each passing year, but their policy toward the communists remained resolutely [firmly] based on no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise—the “three noes.”

Nationalist legislators, who had been elected on the mainland as representatives of all China in 1947, kept those positions in Taiwan for more than 40 years. In effect the Nationalist Party and the Taiwan government were one and the same, and their legitimacy [authority] rested on the principle of one China. On that point they would brook [allow] no argument. And so, in practice, they added a fourth “no”: no political dissent by native Taiwanese. Wielding [using] the authority of martial law, the Nationalists restricted free speech, press, and assembly; prohibited opposition parties; and punished dissenters with jail, torture, even death. They sought to cultivate a sense of “Chineseness” and suppress the islanders’ separate identity as Taiwanese, even banning Taiwanese history in the schools and the Taiwanese dialect [language] from public life. . . .

“In grade school we were fined a dollar for every Taiwanese word they caught us using,” recalls Fan Yun, a 24-year-old Taiwanese. . . . “We don’t want to live under a mainland regime,” Fan said. “The old leaders here were outsiders. To them, Taiwan was a hotel. They reckoned they were

going back to the mainland, so they spent huge sums on the armed forces and next to nothing on roads, rails, and harbors. . . .”

In 1978, Chiang Ching-kuo, the eldest son of Chiang Kai-shek and long-time head of the secret police, succeeded to the presidency. . . . I wondered where this man, known to many by the initials CCK, might lead Taiwan. I was as surprised as anyone when, in July 1987, he ended martial law. . . . In January 1988 CCK died. But his hand-picked successor, President Lee Teng-hui, the first chief of state born in Taiwan, kept the movement alive. Last December [1992] the citizens of Taiwan elected a whole new legislature, finally replacing the old members who had been elected in 1947. Democracy had arrived. . . .

What made this peaceful transition possible? Prosperity. Since 1951 the island’s annual economic growth has averaged almost 9 percent. This year [1993] per capita income will approach \$10,000, bringing Taiwan into line with the other members of Asia’s industrial elite.

From “Taiwan: The Other China Changes Course,” (retitled “Democracy Comes to Taiwan”) by Arthur Zich from *National Geographic*, November 1993. Copyright ©1993 by National Geographic Society. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What complaints did the Taiwanese have about Chinese rule on Taiwan?

2. What event in 1992 finally brought democratic government to Taiwan?

3. How did economic conditions in Taiwan affect the movement for democracy?

Activity

Suppose that you are a Taiwanese newspaper editor living on Taiwan in December 1992. Write an editorial explaining why your readers should vote for Taiwanese rather than Chinese candidates to the national legislature in the upcoming election.