

Kuomintang Through the Ages

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The Kuomintang Party (KMT), established in 1912, ruled China from 1927 until 1948 before moving to Taiwan. The origins of the Kuomintang could be traced back to the decline of the Qing Empire. However, the party that held the mantle of the Chinese Revolution and ushered China into an era without Imperial rule had been forced to retreat outside of China. In recent years, the KMT failed to win the presidency in the 2016 and 2020 elections in Taiwan, raising questions over its legitimacy and relevance in a younger world. Due to this history, it becomes important to understand the KMT's evolution, as it is yet another example of an older party fighting for relevance in the young and contemporary world. While the KMT has made significant gains in the recent legislative elections and will have its eyes set on the presidential elections in 2024, this paper will trace the history of the Kuomintang and look at how it sailed through history and made alterations to its styles to adapt to the changing times.

Background

The KMT is the oldest party in East Asia. The emergence of the Kuomintang party is synonymous with the decline of the Qing Dynasty and the emergence of Sun Yat-sen. The Qing dynasty had promoted itself into a conquering force and ruled China for 268 years. Several internal turmoils during the Qing dynasty ended in devastating rebellions that eventually led to the empire's downfall.

The crippled Qing Dynasty was eventually ousted in 1912, ending China's long imperial period. Sun Yat-sen was elected the provisional President of the newly established Republic of China. During this time, Sun Yat-sen decided to convert his revolutionary society into a political party, forming the Kuomintang.

At this time, the Kuomintang, the National People's Party, was essentially an amalgamation of small political groups. However, the KMT emerged as the dominant political party in China and won the first-ever national elections in 1913. However, shortly after the new republic had been established, a power struggle broke out between the then-President Yuan Shi-kai and the new bicameral National Assembly, which the Kuomintang heavily dominated. As a result, KMT was declared an illegal organisation in November 1913, and the National Assembly was disbanded the following year.

In 1919, Sun re-established the Kuomintang to counter the weak government in Beijing. The KMT, which was rebuilt with Soviet assistance, was a tightly organised Leninist political party in command of an army strong enough to defeat the warlords. Until now, the Leninist organisation of the party still persists.

The principles of the people posited by Sun Yat-sen in his writings could be seen as the guiding principles of the Kuomintang Party since its inception. These principles still continue to guide the ideological base of the party. Sun promoted the three principles of the people throughout the revolution, including the principle of Nationalism, Democracy and livelihood.

Chiang Kai-shek and Military Dictatorship

Following the Chinese Civil War, Chiang Kai-shek, the Republic of China (ROC) army, and the government fled to Taiwan. Close to two million mainlanders sought refuge on the island. Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT were not welcomed with open arms by the island's Indigenous population. Additionally, when the KMT government was still in power on the mainland, it enforced martial law on the island in response to widespread protests demanding government reforms. Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT used to pretext of a possible China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) invasion to justify the upholding of martial law.

During the reign of Chiang Kai-shek, the Kuomintang was essentially at the helm of a one-party authoritarian political system. This was a big deviation from the founding principles of the party outlined by Sun Yat-sen in his writings and the model of government the KMT was attempting to establish in the Republic of China when it was established in the

mainland. Following the loss of the mainland, the KMT also needed to undergo several changes to adapt to its new territory and rule it effectively. In the early 1950s, the KMT was essentially a demoralised and disorganised party. Firstly, Chiang Kai-shek set up a reform committee led by middle-aged loyalists. A process to re-register all members were initiated. Many viewed as disloyal, incompetent, or corrupt were purged from the party. The reforms started showing their effects, and the party emerged with fresh new leaders. Further, Taiwan's economic success also played a key role in the KMT's ability to gain domestic legitimacy.

The KMT also maintained its power during the martial law period through the flawed political system of the country. The system was inherited from when it governed China and is based on the 1947 ROC constitution. The policy structure was maintained due to publicly outlined desires to retake the mainland. To hold new elections just in Taiwan would have undermined the ROC's claim to be the government of China.

Provincial governments and governors were responsible for running the affairs of Taiwan province. As a result, the Provincial Assembly became the highest elected office in Taiwan. However, during this time, Taiwan's democracy was merely a façade and was still a one-party state (Fell, 2018).

Shift from Authoritarianism to Taiwanisation and Democratisation

Taiwan was moving away from strict authoritarianism by the 1980s. Changes in the party were noticeable after Chiang Kai-shek's passing away and the accession of his son, Chiang Ching-kuo. Ching-kuo's political strength allowed him to launch the party's Taiwanisation drive. As a result, younger and well-educated Taiwanese and Mainlander technocrats were promoted to higher positions in both the party and the government.

The major steps to democratise Taiwan effectively came after 1987. Martial law was lifted, and public rallies and mass media restrictions were removed. The Democratic People's Party (DPP) was established in 1986 despite the ban on forming political parties, formally removed only in 1989. Lee Teng-hui became the first Taiwanese President who was born in Taiwan. During his time in office, he oversaw widespread constitutional changes, which led Taiwan to a more democratic political layout. In 1996, in the first-ever direct Presidential elections, he was democratically elected for a second term with a landslide victory.

The formation of the DPP also saw the first actual opposition to the KMT in Taiwan. The DPP started off as a relatively moderate party, promoting democracy and Taiwanese self-determination rather than outright independence. However, in the subsequent years, it became more radical. It adopted more extreme positions on Taiwan's independence and a new constitution. Even though its vote share was just 21.1 per cent in the 1996 presidential elections, it began to cover grounds in the following years. Since the arrival of the DPP and the democratisation of Taiwan, shifts could also be noticed in the ideologies of the KMT. The KMT, which was the pioneer of Chinese nationalism and unification,

moved to the centre on national identity to compete with the DPP. Following a defeat in the 2000 elections, the KMT emphasised economic issues more, dropped its attacks on Taiwan's independence, and employed a mixed identity message.

A Young Taiwan and an Aging Kuomintang

The rise of Lee Teng-hui as the steward for Taiwan's democratisation shifted the regime's focus towards Taiwan itself. The party's long-standing aspiration of controlling the mainland was more or less given up and more focus was placed on Taiwan. A gradual increase in Taiwanese identity could also be observed from this point onwards. Election results and the years that followed the expulsion of Lee Teng-hui from the party have proven that he was indeed right in being pro-Taiwan. The Taiwanese youth sees the KMT's primary goal of reunification as the agenda of an older generation as opposed to today's democratic Taiwan. The KMT's last President was Ma Ying-jeou, whose tenure saw the Sunflower Movement, which was a protest against an agreement with the mainland that the people feared would undermine Taiwanese democracy and independence. The population clearly did not prefer closer political and economic ties with China. 2016 saw the emergence of DPP leader Tsai Ing-wen as the President. Tsai has openly rejected the 1992 consensus, and her rise reflects the current political scenario in Taiwan. The KMT needs to initiate fundamental political shifts and promote a message that will resonate with the party's members and attract new voters.

Conclusion

The Kuomintang is the oldest party in East Asia and has seen many twists and turns in history. The party finds its origins in Sun Yat-sen's ideals. Sun Yat-sen's education in the west greatly affected his political thought, and his ideas were revolutionary for a China that failed to modernise and adapt to the changing world. After the death of Sun Yat-sen, the Kuomintang moved increasingly towards autocracy under Chiang Kai-shek. When they were forced to retreat to the island of Taiwan, the party established a one-party dictatorship for almost thirty-eight years. After initiating the democratisation process, the KMT did see initial success under Lee Teng-hui; however, they failed to sustain that victory. The DPP has taken over executive leadership on the island and has continued to do so despite the country's economic situation. It could be established that the KMT has failed to remain relevant for the younger Taiwanese population, who are more concerned with Taiwanese independence than reunification with the mainland.

The KMT has always believed its forty years of indoctrination, and economic realities would maintain its influential position within Taiwanese politics. This complacency and misplaced optimism have led to the party refraining from modernising and appealing to new and younger voters who have started voting for the DPP. The KMT needs to modify the message it sends to people, take a more pro-independence stance, or at least tune down its support for the 1992 consensus and maintain the status quo. The KMT must introduce radical changes to ensure that the oldest party in East Asia does not lose relevance in a younger world.

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