

# Taiwan's 2022 local elections: What lies ahead?

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To emerge victorious in the 2024 presidential elections, KMT will have to assure its people that it is not pro-China and intends to preserve the status quo

## Local elections and turning points

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Since the result of the 2022's local election released on 26 November, which saw Kuomintang (KMT) taking over the majority of the country's cities and councils, there has been a narrative that Taiwanese democracy is at risk. The reason is that KMT is seen as less aggressive in dealing with the pressure from China and a party which is seen as someone having a soft corner towards China's Communist Party (CCP).

Multiple actions by leading KMT politicians have prompted such claims to gain ground. One of the first was a visit by Han Kuo-yu to China, Hong Kong, and Macau in 2019, immediately after him being elected as the Kaohsiung city mayor. What raised eyebrows among the people was his meeting with Liu Jieyi, the head of the Taiwan Affairs Office in Shenzhen, China. The meeting raised suspicion about KMT's support towards "One Country, Two Systems" to reunify the two geographical spaces into one country. However, the supporters of Han claim that the visit was to increase the business space for Taiwan's agricultural exports to China.

The second reason was as recently as August 2022. Post-Nancy Pelosi's (Speaker of the US House of Representatives) visit to Taiwan on 2-4 August. What followed her visit was the military drills by an angered China around Taiwan. However, it was the KMT's Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia's visit to China on 10 August that created suspicion among the critics. His visit was seen by the KMT Chairman Eric Chu as "very brave and determined". Given the timing of the visit by Hsia, the opposition parties accused KMT of siding with China's narrative on Taiwan.

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Nevertheless, such questionable actions by KMT leaders did not deter the Taiwanese public from overwhelmingly voting for KMT in the 26 November "9-in-1" election. The prized seat of Taipei mayor returned to KMT young gun Chinag Wan-an, who is the youngest mayor of the city so far. The last time KMT was elected in the Taipei city mayor office was by Hau Lung-pin (2006-2014), who served two terms as the mayor.

Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) trump card of using "Resisting China and Preserving Taiwan" backfired in the local elections. It made voters wary of the DPP using national issues for local elections. Local issues such as low salaries, indigenous land

distributions, COVID-19 handling etc., were more in real touch with the locals than China's theatrics around Taiwan post-Pelosi's visit.

One of the prized seats of the city mayor for the DPP was the seat of Taoyuan city. Its incumbent Mayor Cheng Wen-tsan of DPP, who held the position from 2014-2022 and who was touted as one of the presidential candidates due to his popularity among the masses, was not enough to stop KMT from winning the seat in the election. The change in voter mindset to such an important seat reflects the public mood on local issues in the elections.

## What lies ahead?

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With geopolitical tensions being as unpredictable as before, the cross-strait region is one such volatile area. As the ruling DPP and KMT are getting comfortable with the "new normal" post the 2022 local elections, the attention has now shifted to the presidential elections of 2024.

The question of Taiwan's status and security will take the front seat among the political parties, primarily the DPP and KMT, during the presidential elections. As the last major missile drills by China around Taiwan have been the closest so far, the current Taiwanese administration has taken over a decision to increase the mandatory military service to one year, from four months as of now. Such a move was made to bolster the defensive forces and as well to prepare the already shrinking military to be a strong force to reckon with if there is a military confrontation with China.

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When it comes to presidential elections, it is a different ball game as compared to the local ones. The 2024 elections will also be affected by how the regional and major powers, primarily Japan and the United States (US), react to constantly changing cross-strait relations. With both Japan and the US tied up to Taiwan's and China's history, it will be crucial to keep a watch on their policy moves towards the region.

Another party which might floor its candidate for the presidential election is Taiwan People's Party (TPP). The founder of TPP is the former two-time Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je. His wish to run for presidential office is quite well-known. He also mentioned to a DPP councillor to vote for TPP in the upcoming Presidential elections. But the challenges are more to Wen-je than one can think of. Being a new party, TPP is still largely unknown to the majority of the population. TPP still needs to prove that it is "serious" when it comes to administration. Though Ko Wen-je was elected twice to the seat of Taipei, handing him over the country's topmost office will not be a smooth ride.

TPP's major gains from the 2022 local elections are the seat of Hsinchu Mayor. As a new party, TPP also lacks resources and people to work with on the ground. It will be an uphill task for the TPP members to bring trust among the public for them. Given the bells for the 2024 elections is about to begin, time is another challenge for Ko Wen-je and his supporters to do something influential on the ground.

The major change is that the 2024 presidential elections will be seen as a three-party candidate rather than the usual two. The time to elections is also a much-needed time though short for the KMT to convince its voters that it is not supporting any pro-China policies and that it can bring peace to the cross-strait without comprising the status quo.

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