**Chinese python swallowing Taiwan Frog Arrigo 2011**

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The NY Times editorial, “To Save Our Economy, Ditch Taiwan”, has raised my hackles – I always warned Taiwanese independence advocates that the US would sell them out, and here it is literal.

I have not been following the pre-election campaigns, but rather rely on my Taiwanese friends to give their boiled-down version of what’s in the news. More significant than public statements, I think, is the glimpses I have gotten on under-the-table long-term developments, by way of friends and acquaintances in government and business. Recently some Australian visitors to Taiwan asked my opinion, and I hit upon the analogy that Taiwan is a frog that is already in the jaws of a large python, but the python may find it hard to swallow. The “status quo” is of course not static, and has been moving predictably in China’s favor since the mid-1990’s

At the present moment, several factors may be salient. First, Taiwan’s retired military and security officers have been going to China for at least the last two decades, and some even serve as consultants to China. A while back the Taipei Times made a count of over 400. I believe that China has thorough intelligence on Taiwan independence forces and others in Taiwan, and is poised to crack down when needed. For example, last month local newspapers revealed that a professor at the policy academy had copied personal information on Taiwan citizens criticizing China from police files and handed the information over to China. I have also run into numerous Chinese academics coming to Taiwan to “study” the Taiwan independence movement, but what they write generally reports the Kuomintang (KMT) line. As for Taiwan’s capacity for self-defense, to quote a private presentation by one of the correspondents for Jane’s Defence Weekly, Taiwan pays out for the fanciest and shiniest fire engines, but neglects to purchase the hoses. I’d guess that Taiwan’s purchases from the US are in effect protection money, only applicable for the current year.

Second, although China may depend largely on the KMT as its proxy to keep Taiwanese in line, it has been directly influencing KMT and even some current and former Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) elected officials with monetary rewards delivered through intermediaries. One of my sources on this is a member of the Kaohsiung City Council. For example, Chen Chu, mayor of Kaohsiung, was quickly punished for showing “The Ten Conditions of Love” about the heroine of Xinjiang, Rebiya Kadeer, by such a mechanism. It is likely that China, not merely the KMT, was ultimately behind the 2006 blitz to remove Chen Shui-bian.

Third, freedom of speech has markedly contracted. China has been reportedly buying into more and more Taiwan media. It can easily be observed that Taiwan TV news no longer addresses anything more significant than suicides, traffic accidents, and where to buy the best beef noodles (the reporters get convenient payouts from restaurants reported on). As in Singapore, and as in the new policy enacted by the security agencies and the Government Information Office in 1983 after the 1980 Kaohsiung Incident trials for sedition put egg on their faces in international press, political opponents can be crippled through libel charges. The courts have recently been fining those charged with libel $NT5-6 million, e.g. the fine for a commentator calling Shih Ming-deh (now aligned with Blues and Reds) a “political gigolo”. Within academia, universities have at the request of government officials removed from positions of authority professors who have criticized Ma Ying-jeou’s policies; and academics in general have shifted to self-censorship and avoidance of sensitive social and political topics.

Fourth, the rapid economic development of China has pushed past a tipping point: Native Taiwanese capitalists have in past decades understandably been eager to be free from the predatory KMT government and state corporations, and strongly supported the cause of democracy and Taiwan independence as well. But in the 1990’s they moved labor-intensive activities to China and elsewhere by the necessity of international competition, and now the Chinese market looms large as well. China has both increasingly accommodated the Taiwanese businessmen (e.g. allowing them international schools for their children) and enmeshed and controlled them (selective tax audits, with fines open to negotiation). This is the underlying dynamic, I believe, that even Tsai Ing-wen cannot undo, assuming she is elected.

Many Greens think that Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP has a 50-50 chance of being elected, and I hope that she is, but I would not hold my breath. If so, we might have a new lease on the progress of democracy in Taiwan, at least for the time being. It will also be a crucial test of whether we do in fact have a democratic process in voting; but the long economic strength and patronage network of the KMT, intimidation from China, and intentional idiocy of the media inveigh against putting too much trust in real democratic process.

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