

# Taiwan's first woman president: The paradox of Tsai Ing-wen

In 2017, American filmmaker Vanessa Hope approached Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, for permission to film her as she went about the task of governing one of the world's more complicated countries. Hope's interest was sparked by the prospect, in 2016, that the Taiwan might elect its first female president. She ended up tracking Tsai for seven years and making a film that is about much more than a woman as leader. Called *Invisible Nation*, it is a film for its time, made over a period when China was ratcheting up the threat level against Taiwan in ways that boosted Tsai Ing-wen's appeal to the electorate. Despite domestic problems, she achieved a resounding victory in the 2020 election. On view in the film's coverage of elections are not only Tsai but the voters: crying in the rain when she lost in 2012, rapturous in 2016, triumphant in 2020. At one level, the film is about how democracy has turned the inhabitants of Taiwan into Taiwanese. At another, it is a celebration of and salute to Tsai Ing-wen as the first woman to be elected president in Taiwan.

In the course of filming, Hope captured Tsai speaking about the importance of gender equality in politics. Apart from covering the passage of the historic same-sex marriage bill in 2019, the film does not dwell much on gender as an issue. In some respects, it would have been difficult for a film with Tsai as a subject to do so. Her first presidential campaign in 2012 embraced the message of 'first woman president' but to little effect. During her second, in 2016, same-sex marriage emerged as an issue but she was slow to pursue it once in office. She has generally avoided playing the gender card. As president, she demonstrates Taiwan's openness to women in leadership positions. Yet there were only four women in her first cabinet, accounting for just 10 percent of the whole. In the expanded cabinet of 2020, the number dropped to two. The gender ratio in her government closely resembles that in South Korea in 2023, under a frankly anti-feminist male president, Yoon Suk-Yeol.

What explains this paradox? Most respondents to interviews conducted by Young-Im Lee early in Tsai's second term offered one of two answers to the question. One was that Tsai had made it on her own merits and thought others could do the same. The other was that she had to make pragmatic political choices in her appointments. The first of these implies that there were indeed only two or three possible female candidates worthy of appointment on merit alone. The second points to the fact that in making appointments, Tsai was constrained by political realities, including those

related to her membership of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In fact, it seems that the low number of women in Tsai's cabinets present more than one paradox. As much as Tsai herself, the DPP and the wider political society deserve scrutiny for why, under a woman as president, the national cabinet should have a gender imbalance greater than that evident under either of her male predecessors, Ma Ying-jeou and Chen Shui-bian.

A political party does not need a good record on gender issues to produce a female leader. In South Asia, it is political dynasties rather than broad-based female party participation that have yielded female prime ministers. But the DPP does have generally progressive gender policies. Founded in 1986 and since then serving as the main alternative to the formerly all-powerful Kuomintang (KMT), its origins and development are inextricably linked with the development of multi-party democracy in Taiwan. In that process many women activists were involved. In 1989, when the first elections since the lifting of martial law were held, the KMT was held to have 'a better record with both women candidates and women's issues' but the DPP, still very small at that time, has to be given credit for the fact that there were multi-party elections at all. Democracy almost immediately lifted the number of seats held by women above the limit determined by the system of reserved seats in place under martial law. Subsequently, lobbying by women within the party led the DPP in 1996 to adopt a quota system for candidates in the general election that in 2005 became applicable to all parties by virtue of a constitutional amendment.

Joining the DPP in 2004, Tsai Ing-wen was heir to a legacy of political activism by women within the party, much of it core to the party's history and identity. The Vice President at the time was Annette Lu, an outspoken critic of one-party rule during the martial law period. In 1980, Lu was one of eight democracy activists to appear in the first round of trials following the Kaohsiung Incident (a crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations, also known as the Formosa Incident) an event viewed as seminal to democratisation in Taiwan. All eight were convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Released from captivity in 1985, Lu went on to join the DPP in 1990 and became a formidable presence in Taiwanese politics.

Another member of the Kaohsiung Eight was Chen Chu, currently president of the Control Yuan (the ombudsman chamber of the government). Chen makes a cameo appearance in Hope's film, standing in front of the cell where she spent over six years. The former prison where both she and Lu were detained is preserved as part of the Jing-Mei White Terror Memorial Park, one of the many sites marking the

trauma associated with the mainland takeover of Taiwan after World War II. From prison, Chen Chu emerged to renewed political activism in the dominant New Tide faction of the DPP which in 1991 brokered the inclusion of a Taiwanese Republic in the party charter. She later served as mayor of the city with which her early political history is indelibly linked: Kaohsiung. Opposition to her appointment as president of the Control Yuan in 2020 was understandably premised on the assumption that you can take Chen out of the party, but you can't take the party out of Chen.

The high-profile Hsiao Bi-khim, from a younger generation, has worked closely with the DPP since she was in her twenties. She was appointed head of the party's department of international affairs in 1997 and subsequently served as adviser and interpreter for the first DPP president Chen Shui-bian. In 2001, at the age of 30, she won entry into the legislature. Hsiao features prominently in Hope's film, not least as a champion of the equal marriage bill that was passed in 2019. That bill not only made Taiwan the first country in Asia to legalise same-sex marriage but also demonstrated to the world its character as an independent, self-determining country with its own distinct culture, values, and legal system. In 2020, Hsiao was appointed as Taiwan representative in the US, in which role she has been excoriated by the People's Republic of China as an advocate of independence and 'running dog of the Americans'. This latter accusation may have been given force by the fact that Hsiao is the daughter of an American mother although she early surrendered her American citizenship in the interests of holding public office in Taiwan.

On the other side of politics in Taiwan, mainly represented by the Kuomintang (KMT), women have been less prominent. By terms of the 1946 constitution of the Republic of China, the KMT was bound to support a quota of women in government. This commitment was honoured during the period of martial law (1949-1987) but within the framework of one-party rule that constrained activism. Leading women from KMT circles mobilised women but mainly for purposes articulated or approved by the KMT itself. These included the promotion of good housewifery and hygiene and, in the political arena, mass demonstrations in support of the KMT and against the communist regime in the People's Republic of China. The Chinese Women's Anti-Aggression League, founded by Soong Mei-ling (Madame Chiang Kaishek) in 1950, the year after the KMT fled to Taiwan after defeat on the mainland, included cheering for troops as one of its main activities.

In the democracy era, the competitive character of electoral politics forced the KMT to take women into consideration both as voters and as candidates. Shocked by the

DPP victory in the presidential election of 2000, it turned its attention to women's representation, among other things, and adopted a 25 percent quota for candidates in the open party list for the national elections. With the constitutional amendment of 2005, it fell into line with the DPP: 'For each party, women should occupy no less than 50% of the seats won through the party list in parliamentary elections'.

Women, as it turned out, were important in a democracy with universal adult suffrage. In 2008, women voters came out in massive numbers to vote in a KMT president, Ma Ying-jeou. Over the next 10 years, the profile of women in the party was steadily lifted, particularly at local level. In 2014 two KMT women were serving as mayors. The number grew to seven in 2018 and eight in 2022. This means a developing pool of talent on which the national party should be able to draw: the position of mayor is an established stepping-stone for higher office.

KMT history is not completely devoid of women in leadership. In 1988, Shirley Kuo became the first woman to be appointed to a cabinet position, just after the lifting of martial law, and in 1989, as Minister for Finance, she made the news by leading a Taiwan delegation to a meeting of the Asian Development Bank in Beijing. Her appointment followed a long period as Vice-Chairman of the Council for Economic Planning and Development, this during the last phase of martial law, and her career did not extend into the period of robust electioneering. Hung Hsiu-chu, from the same generation, was by contrast a seasoned politician by the time she came to national prominence. A KMT party member from her youth in the 1960s, elected to the Legislative Yuan for eight terms in succession, she was the KMT's presidential candidate in 2015, running against Tsai Ing-wen. In the end, her strong pro-unification stance alienated even some within the China-leaning party. When her approval ratings fell to 13 percent, she was replaced as candidate by seasoned politician Eric Chu, KMT party chairman, who in 2010 had defeated Tsai Ing-wen in the mayoral election for New Taipei. No woman has reached comparable standing in the KMT since that time.

The greater capacity of the DPP either to attract or to produce talented women leaders at the national level is consistent with its history of progressive politics involving women activists and gender issues. Yet the timing of the KMT's reform initiative in 2000s shows that the parties cannot be considered in isolation from each other in policy terms. Their interaction has been crucial to the development of policies that in combination have generated the highest rate of political participation by women in any Asian society and higher, too, than in many Western societies. At the end of August 2018, women accounted for 38 percent of the 113 members of the

Legislative Yuan. Five years later, the figure was 42.86 percent. In the local elections of 2022, female representation in local heads of government reached an historic high of 56.3 percent, with the KMT well outperforming the DPP.

These figures mean that whatever the gender configuration of individual parties in terms of membership and candidates, women enjoy a high level of visibility in Taiwanese politics. During election campaigns, when minor parties often field female candidates, the huge posters used for political advertising are almost as likely to show women as men. Popular commitment to the democratic process is strong among women. Research conducted in 2016 showed that voter turnout among women was higher than among men across the country in almost every cohort up to approximately 65 years of age. Their voting patterns overall show sensitivity to changed circumstances, policies, and personalities. Researchers Yang and Lam pose the question of why 'she' (in the plural) voted for Ma Ying-jeou in 2008. One of their findings is that fewer women than men were rusted-on party supporters. In other words, women are more likely to be swinging voters. By 2012, although still in the lead, Ma was losing his lustre among women voters. DDP-leaning women who crossed party lines to vote for Ma in 2008 crossed back to vote for Tsai Ing-wen; and KMT leaning women deserted their camp likewise to vote for her.

Under these circumstances, parties have become sensitive to the responses of women voters. In the lead-up to the 2024 election, the importance of keeping women in the picture was dramatically apparent in the promise of each of the four potential presidential candidates that he would take on a woman as running mate. Both DPP candidate Lai Ching-te and his rival Ko Wen-je, candidate for the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), made good on that promise. They have had to do more than attend to visuals. At a forum conducted by the Taiwan Women on Boards Association (WOB) in September 2023, Lai Ching-te was forced to defend his record in appointing women to positions of responsibility during his tenure as mayor in Tainan (2010-2017). He promised a cabinet with at least 30 percent women if he won the 2024 election. As president-elect, he will have the opportunity to make good on that promise after his inauguration in May.

The same forum was attended by Ko Wen-je. KoP (Professor Ko), as he is popularly known, occupies a political space similar to Javier Milei's in Argentina, with a populist style that, like Milei's, appeals to 'disgruntled men', typically men who feel they have been marginalised by societies undergoing rapid change. A history of often frankly misogynist statements on his part have contributed to the emergence

of a large gender gap in the TPP's support base. Typical of his often counter-productive public utterances is a statement at the WOB forum that Taiwan has large numbers of elected women because men tend to vote for attractive female candidates. Ko is nonetheless alert to the electoral dangers posed by the gender gap and has been at pains to point out that the party has a large number of women among office-holders and elected representatives.

The third guest at the WOB forum was KMT candidate Hou Yu-ih, who spoke directly to the importance of gender equality and women's work for Taiwan's economic competitiveness. The audience heard that as mayor of New Taipei, Hou presided over a municipal cabinet in which more than one-third of positions were held by women and that he had steadily advanced 'gender equality and women's rights' in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. In keeping with his focus on women's work, he turned finally to the critical issue of support for working women with children, thus homing in on what has come to be regarded as a major national security issue in Taiwan: a birth rate that in the absence of immigration would leave Taiwan's population at half its current level by 2070.

The ready engagement of these male candidates with issues of core concern to women invites consideration of a pattern of political behaviour in European countries with elected female leaders. From a survey of cabinets under male and female leaders in 15 countries over a period of more than 30 years, a team of political scientists led by Diana Z. O'Brien have concluded that a female head of government is associated with lower numbers of women as ministers. They hypothesise that in an environment broadly accepting of gender equality, male leaders have much to gain from promoting women while female leaders seek to avoid accusations that they are favouring women on gender grounds alone. Yet, leadership by women can have positive effects in some other respects, notably support for female candidates and interest in gender issues.

This pattern helps to explain the paradox presented by President Tsai Ing-wen as a woman presiding over a largely male cabinet. Close-grained analysis of the appointments made by her would reveal the specific factors at work in Taiwanese politics, such as party factions. She emerged to leadership of the DPP as a factionally non-aligned candidate and has had to manage the party's factions. She is held to have done so successfully. Challenged in the presidential primaries by New Tide factional heavyweight Lai Ching-te in 2019, she defeated him but also brought him on side as her vice president, effectively providing him with a platform from

which to advance as the candidate for election in 2024. Given her resounding victory in the 2020 election, she should have had the authority to increase the number of women in cabinet had she been interested in doing so. Since the number was instead reduced, it can be concluded that the promotion of women within the government was not a priority for her. In fact, she is known to have reservations about gender quotas generally, despite their demonstrated importance in enhancing women's participation in politics.

Yet with reference to gender issues more broadly, she has acted in ways consistent, again, with the findings of political scientist Diana O'Brien and colleagues. Her cabinet is short of women but it does include the transgender non-binary Audrey Tang, invited in 2016 to join the executive as minister without portfolio, and currently serving as Minister of Digital Communications. A socially conservative electorate made her cautious about hasty action on the same-sex marriage bill, but she did support its passage in 2019. In 2020, she appointed Hsiao Bi-khim as Taiwan's representative in Washington, replacing a distinguished male career diplomat with a woman who came to be known as 'one of Washington's most influential ambassadors', even though she technically wasn't one. Hsiao's stellar performance in the US laid the ground for her recruitment as running mate for Lai Ching-te, paving the way for her own possible succession to the presidency further down the track.

'Even in the absence of these knock-on effects', as O'Brien and colleagues conclude, 'women's ascension to these positions [of national leadership] serves as an important marker of gender equality.' This can be said of Tsai. Her election not only showed that a woman could become president in Taiwan but also drew attention to the high rate of participation by women in Taiwanese politics. The contrast with other East Asian democracies is marked, and with China even more so. In making *Invisible Nation*, Vanessa Hope pointedly juxtaposed Tsai with Xi Jinping, who more than once looms large on the screen dressed in military uniform, solemnly intoning his intent to reunify China. In the film Tsai too makes an appearance in military dress. As president, she is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In this role, her small, resolute figure serves as a symbol of what Taiwan has become: a visibly resilient country with a flourishing democracy that has shown itself capable of electing a woman as president.

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*Image: President Tsai Ing-wen visits the "Tianju Force", April, 2019. Credit: Official*

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