CHAPTER ONE

HOW TAIWAN BECAME DEMOCRATIC

What is a democracy? In the simplest definition, a democracy is a political system in which the people regularly and freely choose their own leaders. Furthermore, in choosing their leaders, the people have the right and the ability to make the opposition the new government. In a democracy, people also have such civil liberties as freedom of speech and press and all citizens have relative equality before the law. Democracies appear in various shapes and forms. Some are presidential such as the United States, while others are parliamentary such as the United Kingdom and many Commonwealth countries. Some are unitary such as the United Kingdom and France while others are federal such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany and India. However, in all these cases the people have and do use their ability to change their rulers freely and peacefully.

Democracy versus “Liberalization”

In looking at the democratization of Taiwan, it is important to make an important distinction between democracy and “liberalization.” Sometimes authoritarian regimes engage in “liberalization” allowing some increase in freedom of speech and the press. They may allow opposition politicians to win office in elections, though they do not relinquish ultimate control. This is “liberalization,” not democratization. From the early 1970s, Taiwan had at least two waves of liberalization. But under both President Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and President Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) an opposition political party could never replace the Kuomintang as the ruling party.1 In fact, until September 1986, no one was allowed to establish opposition political parties of any kind and those who did were imprisoned.2 We will argue below that various practices of

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1 The present writer started to draw this distinction in 1981, see J. Bruce Jacobs, “Political Opposition and Taiwan’s Political Future,” The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, no. 6 (July 1981), p. 21.
2 Before 1986, Taiwan did allow two minority parties, the Youth Party and the Democratic Socialist Party, both of which came to Taiwan from the Mainland. The Kuomintang
“liberalization” in Taiwan did contribute to the smooth transition to democracy after the death of President Chiang Ching-kuo in January 1988.

For readers of Chinese, the term “liberalization” may appear vague. In the United States, “liberalism,” with its emphasis on human rights, is actually to the political left-of-center. However, in Europe, “liberalism” is often seen as right-of-center because economic rights are also important. In Chinese, the classic translation of “liberalization” is ziyouhua 自由化, but a more accurate translation might be songbanghua 鬆綁化, literally the process of “loosening restrictions.”

Democracy and “Taiwanization”

Democratization in Taiwan and “Taiwanization” (bentuhua 本土化) have been two very closely linked processes, but they are different and distinct. Taiwanization emphasizes identification with Taiwan, consciousness of Taiwan and even a Taiwan nationalism. As we will argue in the next chapter, the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) created a “colonial” society in which the Chinese Mainlanders, who account for less than fifteen per cent of Taiwan’s population, controlled the majority Taiwanese who comprise more than eighty-five per cent of the population. In this context, appeals to Taiwan identity provided an important attraction to and source of strength for the opposition. Clearly, not all of those who promoted democracy in Taiwan favored a separate Taiwan and this led to splits in the movement for democracy. Taiwan identity has become the most important—and most divisive—issue in Taiwan’s democratic politics today. But, despite the close association between the development of Taiwan’s democracy and the development of Taiwan identity, the two processes remain conceptually distinct.3

Important Factors Contributing to Taiwan’s Democratization

Ten inter-related factors assisted Taiwan’s process of democratization. Some of these factors can be traced back to the Japanese colonial period

heavily infiltrated both parties and neither attempted to overthrow the Kuomintang. On these two minority parties, see Ibid., pp. 22–23.

3 For an exploration of issues related to Taiwan identity, see John Makeham and A-Chin Hsiau, eds., Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan: Bentuhua (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).