



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 13, 2024

Taiwan Ruling Party DPP's Lai Ching-te Wins Presidential Election

Lai Ching-te, the presidential candidate for Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), emerged victorious after the January 13 election, which China had portrayed as a choice between war and peace.

Lai was facing two opponents for the presidency — [Hou Yu-ih](#) of Taiwan's largest opposition party Kuomintang (KMT), and former Taipei mayor [Ko Wen-je](#) of the small Taiwan People's Party, set up only in 2019. Both conceded defeat.

Notably, this is the third consecutive term as ruling party — something unprecedented under Taiwan's current electoral system — for Lai's DPP, which advocates for Taiwan's separate identity and dismisses China's territorial claims.

Following his victory, Lai declared that he was “determined to safeguard Taiwan from continuing threat and intimidation from China” and said he plans to maintain the present status quo in the Taiwan Strait. He added that his administration will “use dialogue to replace confrontation” in its diplomacy with Beijing — which had cautioned voters against supporting Lai.

“I want to thank the Taiwanese people for writing a new chapter in our democracy,” Lai said in a victory speech where he thanked his two opponents for conceding. “We are telling the international community that between democracy and authoritarianism, we will stand on the side of democracy.”

Nonetheless, Lai also said the DPP did not hold on to a majority in the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's unicameral parliament, where 113 seats were being contested in a separate vote. “The elections have told us that the people expect an effective government as well as strong checks and balances,” he said, adding that “we fully understand and respect these opinions from the public.”

“This means we did not work hard enough, and there are areas we must review and look back on,” Lai said. He pledged to work with the opposition parties and review their policies “as long as they bring benefit to the people,” indicating he anticipated a difficult parliament dominated by two opposition parties.

On the campaign trail, Lai and running mate Hsiao Bi-khim, 52, highlighted continuity with President Tsai Ing-wen, who is also disliked by Beijing but has never pushed for formal independence.

Maintaining the status quo is reflective of the Taiwanese public's wishes, analysts told Channel News Asia. Lai is scheduled to continue President Tsai's “relatively moderate” approach on China, but without cross-strait dialogue the risk of misunderstanding and instability remains, they said.



AP Images
Lai Ching-te



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Lai will be inaugurated on May 20. The period until then will reveal whether Beijing ramps up economic and military pressures to discourage Lai from making radical statements as his term begins.

According to the running vote tally reported by Taiwanese media, Hou was in second place with some 2.7 million votes, while Ko garnered just over two million.

Speaking to reporters in the southern city of Tainan before voting, Lai encouraged people to cast their ballots.

“Every vote is valued, as this is Taiwan’s hard-earned democracy,” he said in brief comments.

In the run-up to the election, China repeatedly slammed Lai as a dangerous separatist and dismissed his repeated calls for talks.

Lai says he is committed to maintaining peace across the Taiwan Strait and boosting the island’s defenses. Taiwan’s defense ministry said on the morning of January 13 it had again discovered Chinese balloons crossing the sensitive strait, one of which flew over Taiwan itself.

The ministry has lambasted the series of balloons reported over the strait in the past month as psychological warfare and a threat to aviation safety.

“Nobody wants war,” said Jennifer Lu, 36, a businesswoman, who was playing on a grass pitch with her daughter after casting a ballot on a sunny morning in Taipei’s Songshan district.

Hou wanted to restart cross-strait engagement starting with people-to-people exchanges and has, like China, slammed Lai for backing Taiwan’s formal independence. In turn, Lai says Hou is pro-Beijing, a claim Hou rejects.

Ko has gathered a passionate support base, particularly among young voters, for focusing on bread-and-butter issues such as the high cost of housing.

He also expressed his hopes to re-engage China, but maintained that such a re-engagement cannot come at the expense of Taiwan’s form of government and way of life.

Taiwan’s parliamentary elections are equally important, particularly if no party wins a majority, potentially undermining the new president’s ability to pass legislation and spending, particularly for defense.

“Compared to previous elections, the result this time is very difficult to predict,” said financial sector worker Liao Jeng-wen, 44, who voted early on January 13, said before the election results were out. “Taiwan’s next leader should think of ways to peacefully get along with China.... Many Taiwanese think we should maintain the status quo.”

Huang Kwei-bo, a professor of diplomacy at National ChengChi University, said, “Lai’s victory results mainly from the split of the main opposition parties that delayed and thus weakened the largest opposition party’s [the KMT’s] preparations in campaigns, including ads and policy discourses.”

The entry of a third-party candidate into the presidential race had upended traditional voting expectations. Ko Wen-je, a former surgeon and mayor of Taipei City, ran to provide a “third way” for voters tired of Taiwan’s DPP and KMT. His critics said his campaign was populist and inconsistent, and short on detail in his plans to deal with China.

A Bloomberg report on January 12 stated that Taiwan does not expect China to stage large military drills around the island immediately after the island’s election. However, the island expects Beijing to



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dial up economic pressure and adopt other coercive measures before the new president takes office in May.

The winter weather is a key reason why China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) probably will not conduct any big exercises in the Taiwan Strait for now, two security officials who asked not to be identified publicly revealed at a briefing in Taipei on Thursday, January 11, as per Bloomberg.

Al Jazeera's Tony Cheng, reporting from Taipei, said that "there is a feeling here that whatever Taiwan does, China is going to travel its own course." "I think [Lai] has made an effort, as have the other candidates, to remain open to dialogue, but they are very aware that this is going to depend on what Beijing wants."

Cheng elaborated that China had made a point that it did not want to see Lai emerge victorious in the election and that a vote for the DPP would be a vote for war. "These are very provocative words, but we've seen Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen managing the situation over the past eight years," he said.

Taiwan's elections have a huge significance due to the territory's disputed political status. The DPP has been in power for the past eight years under President Tsai.

Some 19.5 million people aged 20 and over were eligible to vote, and voter turnout was expected to be high according to public transit data.

While Taiwan has been de facto independent since the 1940s, China still claims the island nation and its outlying territories as its own, and has not ruled out the use of military force to reunite the island with the mainland.



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