Failure and Success of Third Parties in Taiwan

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Since the first multi-party elections in the late 1980s, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have dominated elections in Taiwan. However, it would be wrong to categorise Taiwan as having a two party system, as elections have shown there is often space for third parties. Although most attempts to break the domination of the KMT and DPP have been electoral flops, there have been some successes. For instance, in the mid 1990s the New Party (NP) was a major political player and since 2000 two new parties, the People First Party (PFP) and the Taiwan Solidarity Union, have emerged. In fact in the 2001 legislative election campaign, the PFP threatened to replace the KMT as the largest opposition party.

This paper seeks to explain the failure and limited successes of these parties. First, I briefly outline the respective fates of the significant attempts to create electorally viable third parties. Second, I follow Paul Lucardie’s model of explaining new parties’ success or failure in terms of the following explanatory variables: (1) its political project or platform; (2) its human and financial resources; and (3) the political opportunity structure or electoral environment. My main source materials are a series of elite interviews carried out with Taiwanese politicians, political scientists, and party activists from the NP, PFP,
Taiwan Independence Party, Social Democratic Party and labour movement, and secondary reading of campaign reviews over the last fifteen years.

I show how all three factors are critical in the fate of new contenders. For instance, the social democratic parties of the late 1980s and early 1990s failed, as they did not have a policy package that could attract Taiwanese voters, they lacked both human and financial resources, and there was little room on the political environment. As at that time the KMT remained strong, and the DPP was rapidly expanding its support level. In contrast, the NP was able to appeal to disgruntled KMT supporters on both the national identity and corruption issues and take advantage of splits within the KMT. Also the party had a core group of attractive young politicians with clean reputations and election experience. However, the NP collapsed as the KMT appeared to shift to the right in 1998 and a new rival on the right in the PFP appeared. The experience of the last fifteen years implies that third parties can develop in Taiwan; however, there is greatest scope to the right of the KMT and in elections using Multi-Member Districts.