How Did Taiwan Move from Authoritarian Rule to Democracy?

ROC40 · Q11 | 2026-11-21

On 15 July 1987, the Republic of China (Taiwan) lifted martial law. Thirty-eight years of martial-law rule came to an end, the bans on new political parties and new newspapers began to loosen, and an authoritarian polity began its transition toward democracy. Less than a decade later, the Republic of China (Taiwan) held its first direct presidential election; four years after that, the first change of ruling party was completed. This process involved no civil war, no collapse of the state apparatus, and no large-scale social disorder — a rarity in the twentieth century's wave of democratization.

How did the democratic transition of the Republic of China (Taiwan) happen? Why was a polity that had long practiced authoritarian rule able to complete democratization on a relatively peaceful track? The answer lies not in any single election or any single leader, but in the convergence of three conditions: social resistance from below opened up space, a reformist faction from above seized the moment, and an administrative and legal apparatus that kept running throughout meant that the transfer of power did not have to come at the price of institutional collapse.

I. The Form of the Authoritarian System and Its Cracks

After the government of the Republic of China moved to Taiwan in 1949, the Republic of China (Taiwan) long lived under the mobilization-for-suppressing-the-rebellion system: martial law, a ban on new political parties, a ban on new newspapers, and central popular representatives who were not re-elected for decades. This system had its historical causes — civil war, cross-strait confrontation, and the Cold War order — but it also accumulated internal tensions: the Taiwanese-born population was long restricted in political participation, the economic takeoff produced an educated middle class and working class, and the *dangwai* (outside-the-party) movement grew in the gaps left by elections. The Zhongli Incident of 1977 and the Formosa Incident of 1979 marked the shift of social resistance from isolated dissent to an organized opposition movement. The authoritarian system did not collapse overnight; its cracks widened gradually through repeated cycles of election, resistance, and repression.

II. The Decisive Turn: 1986–1996

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The decisive decade of the transition was a series of reforms, each backed by legal procedure. In 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party was founded while the ban on new parties was still in place, and the authorities did not suppress it; in 1987, martial law was lifted; in 1988, Chiang Ching-kuo died, Lee Teng-hui succeeded him as president, and began to push localization and democratization reforms. In 1990, the Wild Lily student movement put forward demands — dissolving the National Assembly and direct presidential elections among them — and received a response from across the political spectrum; in 1991, the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion were abolished, and the “eternal parliament” moved toward full re-election; in 1992, the Legislative Yuan was fully re-elected; in 1994, the mayor of Taipei was directly elected for the first time, and democratic competition extended from the central government to local government; in 1996, the first direct presidential election was held. What characterized this sequence of reforms was that each step kept part of the old system’s personnel and institutions, yet changed the source of power — from appointment and convention to election and public opinion.

III. Why There Was No Collapse: Three Stabilizers

First, the continuity of the administrative apparatus: the civil service, public finance, the police, and the military did not disintegrate during the transition; the government’s day-to-day functions kept running, and no vacuum appeared in basic social order. Second, the restraint of the military and the process of its nationalization: the military gradually withdrew from politics, and the object of its loyalty shifted from individuals and a political party to the constitution and the state apparatus; this process was incomplete, but it prevented military intervention in politics. Third, the cushion provided by the economy and society: sustained economic growth provided employment and fiscal revenue, and the middle class and civil-society organizations became forces supporting reform rather than destroying it. Working together, the three stabilizers made democratization a process of “changing the engine without dismantling the car.” In addition, the restoration of press freedom and the growth of civil society gave discontent an institutional outlet: grievances could be pursued through ballots, lawsuits, and public opinion, rather than through street violence.

IV. The Limits of the Transition and the Unfinished Business

The democratization of the Republic of China (Taiwan) was not without cost or regret. Transitional justice started late, and the archives, personnel, and party-assets issues of the authoritarian era long remained unresolved; divisions of identity — provincial origin, unification versus independence, and others — entered electoral politics and at times intensified into ethnic mobilization; money politics, factionalism, and media disorder also appeared in new forms

after democratization. More importantly, democratization answered the question of “how power is produced,” but it did not automatically answer the question of “how power is constrained” — judicial independence, local self-government, and citizen participation still need sustained building. As the research conclusion cited in the first question of this series points out, one reason modern Chinese history repeatedly fell into the cycle of dynastic change was precisely that transfers of power long depended on force; what makes this experience valuable is that it completed a change of ruling party through elections instead of force. But democratization is only the starting point of constitutional reconstruction, not its end. This experience also reminds those who come after: democracy is not a single vote, but the daily working of a whole set of institutions — courts, the legislature, the media, and local self-government are all indispensable.

V. The Daily Working of Institutions: How Elections, Parties, and Local Self-Government Interlock

Once democratization is complete, what truly tests the institutions is not election night, but their daily working: whether elections can be held regularly without interruption, whether parties can hand over power peacefully after losing, and whether local self-government can let people take part in public affairs in the place closest to home. The experience of the Republic of China (Taiwan) shows that these three must interlock: central elections decide who holds power, local elections cultivate political talent and habits of accountability, and party competition channels social divisions into parliamentary debate rather than pushing them onto the streets. If any link is missing, democracy limps — with only central elections and no local self-government, democracy stops at polling day; with only changes of ruling party and no legislative checks, a change of ruling party can turn into a new round of dividing up posts.

Daily working also needs an invisible infrastructure: an independent election administration, open vote-counting procedures, credible rules on party finance, and institutional arrangements that let losing candidates leave the stage with dignity. Whether losers can accept defeat is the most direct measure of how consolidated a democracy is: when the losing side believes it will have another chance to win next time, it has no need to overturn the table. That the Republic of China (Taiwan) has gone through multiple changes of ruling party without institutional collapse turns on precisely this — losers stay inside the system, winners are constrained by the system, and elections become the routine channel for resolving disagreements, rather than an extraordinary measure for extraordinary times.

VI. The Limits of the Lesson: What Can Be Learned, What Cannot Be Copied

The experience of the Republic of China (Taiwan) offers inspiration to those working toward transition on the mainland, but inspiration is not a template. What can most readily be learned is craft: how elections are organized, how parties compete, how local self-government gets started, how press freedom is restored — these are lessons at the level of practice, which can be studied and borrowed. What cannot be copied is the set of conditions: the international environment at the time of the transition, the level of economic development, the social structure, and the geopolitical situation were not the same on the mainland as in the Republic of China (Taiwan); treating Taiwan's path as a road map for the mainland both underestimates the scale and complexity of the mainland and overlooks the differences in the two places' historical experience (for the numerical argument on the scale gap, see Q15 of this series; this question cites its conclusion).

Boundary awareness is itself part of the lesson. The right posture for learning from another country's experience is to look with questions in hand, not to fit it to ready-made answers: first ask which constraints a mainland transition faces that the Republic of China (Taiwan) never faced — a multi-layered governance structure, a huge state-owned sector, urban-rural and regional disparities — and then ask which parts of Taiwan's experience can answer those specific questions. Any borrowing that cannot answer a specific question is only a slogan. The universal principles of democratization — elections, the rule of law, local self-government, and press freedom — apply to every society; but the institutional forms that realize those principles must be designed, tested, and revised by the society in transition itself. The value of the Republic of China (Taiwan) lies in proving that a Chinese society can walk the democratic road; what specific road to walk is a question for the people of the mainland themselves.

Further Reading

Forty Questions Index (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/roc-history-constitutional-reconstruction/)

What Lessons Does Taiwan's Streamlining of the Provincial Government Hold for Local Governance on a Future Mainland? (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e5%8f%b0%e6%b9%be%e7%b2%be%e7%9c%81%e6%94%b9%e9%9d%a9%e7%bb%99%e6%9c%aa%e6%9d%a5%e5%a4%a7%e9%99%86%e5%9c%b0%e6%96%b9%e6%b2%bb%e7%90%86%e4%bb%80%e4%b9%88%e5%90%af%e7%a4%ba%ef%bc%9f/) (Q13)

What Experience and Limits Does Taiwan's Transitional Justice Offer? (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e5%8f%b0%e6%b9%be%e7%9a%84%e8%bd%ac%e5%9e%8b%e6%ad%a3%e4%b9%89%e6%9c%89%e5%93%aa%e4%ba%9b%e7%bb%8f%e9%aa%8c%e4%b8%8e%e5%b1%80%e9%99%90%ef%bc%9f/) (Q14)

How Large a Mainland Political Transition Task Can Taiwan’s Existing Institutions Bear? (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e5%8f%b0%e6%b9%be%e7%8e%b0%e6%9c%89%e5%88%b6%e5%ba%a6%e8%83%bd%e5%a4%9f%e6%89%bf%e6%8b%85%e5%a4%9a%e5%a4%a7%e8%a7%84%e6%a8%a1%e7%9a%84%e5%a4%a7%e9%99%86%e6%94%bf%e6%b2%bb%e8%bd%ac%e5%9e%8b%e4%bb%bb/) (Q15)

How to Judge Whether a Transition Plan Is Reliable (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e6%80%8e%e6%a0%b7%e5%88%a4%e6%96%ad%e4%b8%80%e4%b8%aa%e8%bd%ac%e5%9e%8b%e6%96%b9%e6%a1%88%e6%98%af%e5%90%a6%e9%9d%a0%e8%b0%b1/) (Guide I06)

Sources

Forty Questions Index (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/roc-history-constitutional-reconstruction/)

Introductory Essays of This Series (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/roc-history-constitutional-reconstruction/) (I01–I06)

From the Xinhai Revolution to Today: Why Has China Repeatedly Fallen into the Dynastic Cycle? (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e4%bb%8e%e8%be%9b%e4%ba%a5%e9%9d%a9%e5%91%bd%e5%88%b0%e4%bb%8a%e5%a4%a9%ef%bc%9a%e4%b8%ad%e5%9b%bd%e4%b8%ba%e4%bd%95%e5%8f%8d%e5%a4%8d%e9%99%b7%e5%85%a5%e6%94%b9%e6%9c%9d%e6%8d%a2%e4%bb%a3%e7%9a%84/) — the conclusion on the “dynastic cycle,” cited in this question

Free China Movement Research Papers (https://freechina.live/research-archive/research-library/chinese-federalism-papers/) — conclusion cited; argument not restated

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