What Lessons Does Taiwan's Provincial Streamlining Reform Offer for Future Local Governance on the Mainland?

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At the end of 1998, the Taiwan Provincial Government passed into history — not abolished, but “streamlined”: its functions were transferred to the central government, its organization drastically cut back, and the governor no longer popularly elected. This reform, known as *jingsheng* (provincial streamlining), was a rare case in the constitutional history of the Republic of China (Taiwan) of a government “reforming itself”: one tier of government voluntarily handed over its powers and its budget.

Why is streamlining worth studying for local governance on the mainland? Because it answers the most practical question of a transitional period: when an old administrative tier no longer fits the new political reality, how do you slim it down without paralyzing government? How do you pull powers upward without leaving a vacuum in local governance? Streamlining’s answer was not a single sweeping cut, but a sequenced craft with supporting measures and compensation.

I. The Background of Streamlining: Why the Provincial Tier

After 1949, the central government moved to Taiwan, and its actual jurisdiction roughly coincided with Taiwan Province, producing a duplication of “two sets of offices governing the same territory” — province and centre. After democratization in the 1990s, the popular election of the governor gave the provincial tier a new popular mandate, and friction over powers with the centre followed: in 1994 James Soong (Soong Chu-yu) was elected the first popularly elected governor, and the province’s political weight suddenly grew; after the direct presidential election of 1996, the conflict of authority between centre and province became open. Whether a tier of government was a vehicle of local self-government or an obstacle to central administration became a question that could no longer be avoided. The fourth constitutional amendment of 1997 gave the answer: Taiwan Province was reduced to a nominal tier, the governor was henceforth appointed by the President on the nomination of the Premier of the Executive Yuan, the Provincial Assembly was renamed the Provincial Consultative Council, and the province’s status as a self-governing entity was abolished. The friction between province and centre was not an abstract dispute

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over powers, but concrete conflicts over budgets, personnel, and policy: the provincial government controlled vast agriculture and forestry, transport, and education and culture budgets, and the governor, backed by a popular mandate, stood toe to toe with the centre on policy. That the 1997 amendment was able to pass was related to this background: government and opposition alike realized that the cost of keeping two sets of offices had already exceeded the benefit of retaining the provincial tier.

II. How Streamlining Was Done: A Three-Step Craft

First, constitutional amendment came first: a constitutional amendment established the legal basis for reducing the province to a nominal tier, avoiding the legitimacy disputes that would have followed a restructuring imposed by executive order. Second, functions and personnel were transferred together: the provincial government's existing functions were transferred by category to the central ministries and commissions, and personnel moved with their functions or took preferential retirement and separation, avoiding a vacuum in which "the people left but no one took over the work." Third, finances and assets were settled: provincial property and budget items were cleared in parallel, and debts and payment obligations were assigned clear successors, so that no fiscal black hole "answerable to no one" appeared after the reform. The key was not speed, but that "every power had a receiving body, and every person had a placement plan." The transfer was given a transition period: functions were handed over in batches, personnel could choose to move with their functions or accept preferential retirement, and the provincial government's archives, official seals, and unfinished cases were handed over item by item, so the reform left no pile of orphaned loose ends.

III. Lessons for Local Governance on the Mainland

First, streamlining a tier must first settle the question of "why keep this tier": the mainland's provincial, municipal, and county tiers likewise suffer overlapping functions, and in a transition the unit of reform should be a "list of responsibilities" rather than the "survival of an institution" — first clarify which tier does what, then decide which tier can be streamlined. Second, personnel placement is the key to a reform's success or failure: the streamlining experience shows that if the departure, treatment, and dignity of civil servants are mishandled, reform creates its most organized opponents; "move with the function, protect pay and benefits, set a transition period" is a replicable craft. Third, fiscal succession must keep pace with the transfer of functions: powers handed upward while fiscal powers are not, or vice versa, will create a new governance vacuum and turn streamlining into buck-passing. Fourth, reform must be explained clearly to society: throughout the process, streamlining was publicly presented as "streamlining, not abolishing the province and then

abandoning it,” so that local people believed services would not be interrupted; local reform in a transitional period likewise needs such verifiable commitments, or streamlining will be read as the centre grabbing power and provoke local backlash.

IV. The Limits of Streamlining

Streamlining is no panacea. After Taiwan Province was reduced to a nominal tier, some local affairs fell into a gap where “the centre could not see them and the counties and cities could not reach them”; the Provincial Consultative Council’s advisory function was limited, and channels for expressing local public opinion were at one point weakened. More importantly, streamlining took place in a society where democratization was essentially complete, and the reform was backed by a popular mandate and legal procedures; in the early stages of a mainland transition, the rule of law and popular mandates are themselves still being rebuilt, so copying streamlining’s sequence of “constitutional amendment first, transfer second” may not be feasible. Moreover, streamlining dealt with streamlining a single tier; local governance on the mainland faces multiple overlapping tiers — province, city, county, township — and streamlining any one tier pulls on the two tiers above and below it, so the complexity of reform grows not linearly but exponentially. The true lesson of streamlining does not lie in the conclusion “abolish the province,” but in the craft of reform: legitimacy first, every function received by someone, every person with a way out, and the finances accounted for clearly.

V. After Streamlining: The Legacy Problems of a Nominal-Tier Province and Later Reforms

Streamlining did not make Taiwan Province disappear entirely; it turned it into a nominal-tier existence: the provincial government was drastically cut back into a dispatched organization of the Executive Yuan, and the Provincial Consultative Council retained only an advisory function. This arrangement avoided the constitutional controversy of abolishing the province outright, but it also left a set of legacy problems: the nominal province’s budgets and personnel still had to be drawn up, the subsequent disposal of provincial property dragged on for years, and local people were at times puzzled by the state of “the province still exists, yet the province is gone.” The direction of later reform has always swung between “complete clean-up” and “maintaining the status quo”: complete clean-up would require another constitutional amendment, at high political cost; maintaining the status quo means paying the administrative cost of a nominal-tier institution over the long term. The second half of streamlining shows that the work of winding a reform up is as important as the reform itself: if the streamlining of a tier has no clean-up timetable, temporary arrangements become permanent ones.

Handling the legacy problems also affects the relationship between counties and cities and the centre. After the province was reduced to a nominal tier, cross-county and cross-city affairs that the province used to coordinate were handed to central ministries and commissions to deal directly with county and city governments; county and city finances and responsibilities grew accordingly, and the coordination cost between centre and counties and cities rose. This change reminds those who come later: streamlining a tier is never simply removing a tier, but reallocating its functions to the tiers above and below; if the receiving bodies' capacity is not raised in parallel, the costs saved by streamlining will reappear in the form of coordination costs. A complete assessment of streamlining therefore cannot look only at how much money and how many people the provincial tier saved, but must also count how much more the counties, cities, and the centre paid in coordination and oversight.

VI. Craft Tips for Multi-Layer Streamlining on the Mainland: In Batches, by Category, by Layer

Local governance on the mainland faces not a single tier but multiple overlapping tiers — province, city, county, township; copying streamlining's sequence of "constitutional amendment first, transfer second" may not be feasible (as Section IV of this article has already discussed), but the craft of streamlining can still be translated into three tips. First, in batches: do not move all tiers at once; first select one category of functions that is clearly defined and little disputed, pilot its transfer, verify the receiving body's capacity, and then expand the scope; the replicability of a successful pilot matters far more than the resolve to roll everything out at once. Second, by category: decide the method of streamlining by the nature of the function — executive functions can be merged or handed upward, decision-making functions should be devolved to the tier closest to the people, and supervisory functions must be independent of the bodies they supervise; different functions within the same tier should not be handled by the same method. Third, by layer: the streamlining plan for each tier must at the same time spell out the receiving arrangements of the tiers above and below it; when streamlining the provincial tier, spell out what the centre takes and what the counties and cities take; when streamlining the city tier, likewise spell out what the province and the counties take. Only when batching, categorization, and layering work together will streamlining avoid creating a new duplication of overlapping layers even as it resolves one.

Further Reading

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

How Did Taiwan Move from Authoritarian Rule to Democracy? (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/

%e5%8f%b0%e6%b9%be%e5%a6%82%e4%bd%95%e4%bb%8e%e5%a8%81%e6%9d%83%e7%bb%9f%e6%b2%bb%e8%b5%b0%e5%90%91%e6%b0%91%e4%b8%bb%ef%bc%9f/) (Q11)

How Much of 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)

Local Self-Government and Everyday Life (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e5%9c%b0%e6%96%b9%e8%87%aa%e6%b2%bb%e4%b8%8e%e6%97%a5%e5%b8%b8%e7%94%9f%e6%b4%bb/) (Intro I05)

How Should Fiscal Powers Be Divided Among the Central Government and Provincial and County Governments? (https://freechina.live/%e7%ae%80%e4%bd%93%e4%b8%ad%e6%96%87-simplified-chinese/%e4%b8%ad%e5%a4%ae%e6%94%bf%e5%ba%9c%e4%b8%8e%e7%9c%81%e3%80%81%e5%8e%bf%e6%94%bf%e5%ba%9c%e5%ba%94%e5%a6%82%e4%bd%95%e5%88%86%e9%85%8d%e8%b4%a2%e6%94%bf%e6%9d%83%ef%bc%9f/) (Q32)

Sources

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

Introductory Articles to 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/)" — conclusion cited; causal argument not repeated

Seven-Law Transition Package Hub (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/seven-law-transition-package/) — model statute, not enacted law

Translated from the ZH-Hans master (published 2026-11-04).

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