How Large a Mainland Political Transition Task Can Taiwan's Existing Institutions Bear?

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Suppose that one day, a political transition on the mainland needed outside institutional experience to support it — how large a task could the existing institutions of the Republic of China (Taiwan) bear? This question cannot be answered on enthusiasm, nor on pessimism. How much an institution can bear depends on three hard constraints: the number of people, the amount of money, and the transplantability of the institution itself.

The conclusion first: the existing institutions of the Republic of China (Taiwan) can offer valuable “models, people, and know-how,” but they cannot directly take on governance tasks at mainland scale. Their value lies in demonstration and support, not in substitution. Treating a model as a substitute is an underestimation of the scale gap on both sides.

I. The Scale Gap: The Numbers First

Taiwan has a population of about 23 million; the mainland, about 1.4 billion — a difference of roughly sixty times. The gaps in the numbers of judges, civil servants, police, and teachers are equally stark: the volume of cases the judicial system of the Republic of China (Taiwan) handles each year and the size of the jurisdictions its administrative system serves are not on the same order of magnitude as any large province on the mainland. This is not criticism, but arithmetic: a system designed for 23 million people, scaled up sixty times directly, will not simply run. Finance, personnel, information systems, and oversight mechanisms — each one needs to be redesigned, not scaled up proportionally. Consider finance and information too: the annual budget of the central government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) is likewise not on the same order of magnitude as the fiscal scale of a single mainland province; the population bases served by household registration, taxation, social security, and health insurance information systems differ by tens of times, and expanding those systems is not a matter of simply buying hardware, but of rebuilding processes, standards, and regulatory capacity. The scale gap also shows up in time: the institutional building Taiwan completed over decades cannot be replicated on the mainland within a few months of transition; any timetable must be estimated in units of ten years.

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II. What Can Be Transplanted

First, election technology and procedures: election administration, vote counting, dispute adjudication, and rules for fair party competition — these are replicable crafts. Second, institutional principles: judicial independence, separation of powers, local self-government, and press freedom — these principles do not depend on scale. Third, people and experience: the Republic of China (Taiwan) has trained a cohort of judges, lawyers, civil servants, journalists, and civic-organization workers familiar with democratic operations; they can serve as advisers, trainers, and observers, without having to govern themselves. Fourth, the experience of civic education and public discussion: how to help ordinary citizens understand constitutions, budgets, and elections, and how to organize public debates, hearings, and civic groups — this soft experience can likewise be transferred, and is often harder to obtain than hard institutions. What these four kinds of transplantation share is that they transfer “know-how and experience,” not “the power to govern.”

III. What Cannot Be Transplanted Directly

First, the nationalization of the military and security-sector reform: the nationalization of the military in the Republic of China (Taiwan) was completed over decades under specific historical conditions; the mainland’s security apparatus differs entirely in scale, structure, and pattern of interests, and there is no ready-made template. Second, the complexity of local governance: the mainland’s provinces, cities, counties, and townships stack in multiple layers, and its ethnic, religious, and regional development gaps are far greater than Taiwan’s; the streamlining experience of a single tier cannot simply be moved across. Third, the source of political legitimacy: the mandate of the popularly elected government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) comes from Taiwan’s voters; a mainland transition needs its own authorization procedure by the mainland people, and no outside institution can substitute for that procedure. In addition, differences in economic structure cannot be ignored: Taiwan is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises and export-oriented industry, while the mainland has a huge state-owned sector, a dual urban-rural structure, and a gulf in regional development; the same set of fiscal and social-security rules will produce entirely different effects in the two economic structures.

IV. A Sensible Division of Labor: Model, Support, and Bridging

The best positioning for the role of the Republic of China (Taiwan) is threefold: to provide an institutional model that can be visited and studied; to provide training and technical support (election administration, the judiciary, local self-government, civic education); and, during the transition period, to provide limited coordination and observation functions, without seeking the power to

govern. The subject of the transition can only be institutions built by the mainland people themselves; the value of outside experience lies in shortening the time spent on trial and error, not in replacing trial and error itself. Recognizing this protects both sides: it keeps the Republic of China (Taiwan) from taking on responsibilities beyond its capacity, and it keeps the mainland from treating an outside model as a ready-made answer. One last point needs to be made: the assessment of bearing capacity itself also calls for humility — the actual constraints of the transition period will only fully reveal themselves once the transition begins. The role of a model is to let the mainland people take fewer wrong turns at the start; but the road must ultimately be walked by the mainland people themselves, and the institutions must ultimately be built by the mainland people themselves.

V. The Organizational Forms of Support: Advisers, Training, and Joint Working Groups

Once the positioning of model, support, and bridging is settled, the next question is organizational form: through what kind of bodies should support be provided, so that it is both effective and does not overstep? First, advisory groups: small teams of advisers made up of judges, lawyers, election experts, and local self-government workers, providing advice at the invitation of the mainland side — advisers advise only, they do not decide, and the record of consultations is made public. Second, training programs: systematic training for the mainland's future election officials, judges, journalists, and civic-organization workers, with content centered on procedures and techniques — how to organize elections, how to run a court, how to operate a local council — rather than exporting ideological slogans. Third, joint working groups: for specific transition tasks, such as the technical preparation for a first election or the drafting of a first local self-government ordinance, working groups with a defined task and deadline are set up, and disbanded when the task is done. The shared principle of all three forms is that the support body should be smaller in scale than the task it supports, the recipient always holds decision-making power, and the supporter always remains in a position where it can be asked to leave.

Organizational form also determines the direction of accountability: advisory groups answer to the party that invited them, training programs disclose their accounts to trainees and funders, and joint working groups answer to the task brief agreed by both sides. If a support body inflates itself, stays on long-term, and turns from adviser into de facto decision-maker, support degenerates into a variant of takeover. Support agreements should therefore state in advance: the scope of the task, the time limit, the source of funding, and the conditions for exit. When the time limit arrives, the support ends; when the task changes, the agreement is renegotiated. Putting support inside organizational forms with

boundaries is an institutional respect for the recipient's agency — and protection for the supporter itself: only a limited commitment is a credible commitment.

VI. Evaluation and Course Correction: How to Judge Whether Support Works

Whether support works cannot be decided by the supporter itself, but must be measured against the recipient's actual needs. The first standard of evaluation is the mainland people's own judgment: whether the training solved the concrete problems they encountered, whether the advisers' suggestions were feasible under mainland constraints, and whether the joint working groups' proposals were actually adopted. Any advice the recipient shelves, however elegantly designed, should be counted as ineffective support. The second standard is the sustainability of the institutions: after the support ends, can the recipient operate on its own — can elections be organized by themselves, can courts try cases by themselves, can local councils deliberate by themselves? Any project that stops turning the moment support leaves is dependence, not capacity. The third standard is a correction mechanism: support projects should undergo regular independent evaluation, the evaluation reports should be made public, and projects that perform poorly should be adjusted or terminated, rather than continued by inertia.

The point of evaluation and course correction is to prevent support from becoming a ritual of self-congratulation. The most common failure in the history of transition support is not too little support, but the supporter becoming absorbed in the self-affirmation of "we are helping," while never asking whether the help actually hit the mark. Handing evaluation to the recipient and to third parties, writing correction into the agreement, and treating termination as a normal option — only then can support genuinely shorten the mainland people's trial-and-error time, rather than substituting a grand show of support for the mainland people's own institution-building. There is only one standard for the success of support: the recipient needs support less and less.

Further Reading

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)

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)

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/) (Guide I05)

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)

How Should the Central Government and Provincial and County Governments Allocate Fiscal Powers? (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

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/) — conclusion cited; causal argument not restated

Seven Laws Transition Package Hub (https://freechina.live/governance-public-policy/third-republic-governance-blueprints/seven-law-transition-package/) — model laws, not laws already in force

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

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institutions-actuelles-de-taiwan-peuvent-elles-supporter/) · Deutsch (https://freechina.live/deutsch/wie-gross-eine-politische-ubergangsaufgabe-auf-dem-festland-konnen-taiwans-bestehende-institutionen-tragen/) · Español (https://freechina.live/espanol/que-magnitud-de-tarea-de-transicion-politica-continental-pueden-asumir-las-instituciones-actuales-de-taiwan/)