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T015｜Does the Existence of Opposition Parties Necessarily Cause National Division?

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1. The claim, stated fairly

The argument runs like this. Let an opposition party exist, and the country splits into hostile camps. Elections stop being contests over policy and become winner-take-all battles over who "we" are. The losers refuse to accept the result, grievances harden, and sooner or later a party that loses at the ballot box reaches for separation instead. On this view, a single ruling party with consultative partners is not a defect but a safeguard.

This is not a straw man. It is the official reasoning of the Chinese government itself, set out in the 2021 white paper that anchors this essay. The white paper warns that in the old-fashioned party systems, "when making decisions and exercising governance, political parties act in their own interests or the interests of the classes, regions and groups they represent, cling obstinately to their own ideas and keep dissidents out, making society divided." That sentence deserves to be taken seriously. The question is whether it proves what it is often taken to prove — that the *existence* of opposition parties *necessarily* causes national division. It does not.

2. Three things that must not be collapsed

The myth works by collapsing three different things into one word, "division."

Party competition is a contest for office inside agreed rules: parties compete, one wins, the loser accepts the result and tries again. *National identity* is the question of who belongs to the political community and on what terms. *Territorial conflict* is a dispute over borders, sovereignty, or secession, often backed by force.

These three can coincide, but none of them entails the others. A party can compete fiercely for office without challenging national identity at all. An identity dispute can burn fiercely in a country with no legal

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opposition party, because banning parties does not ban identities. And territorial conflicts — the kind that actually break states apart — are usually driven by armed force, collapsing central authority, or the redrawing of empires, not by an opposition bench in parliament. If we do not keep these three apart, every quarrel becomes proof of the myth, and the myth becomes unfalsifiable.

3. What the white paper itself actually says

The primary source for this topic is the State Council Information Office white paper of June 2021, *China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation*. "There are many types of political party system around the world, and there is not a single system that is good for all countries." And the system it describes is not a one-party system in the strict sense: "in addition to the CPC, there are eight other political parties" — the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang, the China Democratic League, and six others — plus prominent individuals without party affiliation. In the Preamble's words, "the CPC exercises state power and the other parties participate fully in the administration of state affairs under the leadership of the CPC."

The white paper's case rests on two claims, and they point in opposite directions. The first is the warning quoted above: multiparty competition can be destructive. The second is a concession its authors state plainly: their system is designed around "effectively mitigating the risks of inadequate oversight in one-party rule, and the problems of power rotation and destructive competition among multiple political parties." In other words, the official account itself names *two* risks — the risk of competition without rules, and the risk of rule without oversight — and presents its system as a balance between them. If the absence of opposition were sufficient for unity, there would be no second risk to mitigate.

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4. Case one: Taiwan — competition intensified, the polity did not split

The strongest test is a case where opposition parties emerged inside a Chinese political culture, competed hard, and repeatedly took power. Taiwan is that case, and its record is set out in detail in CCE-114, "What Does the Existence of Opposition Parties Mean for Political Health?", which this essay cites rather than repeats.

The Democratic Progressive Party was founded on 28 September 1986, while martial law was still in force. Taiwan held its first direct presidential election in 1996. In 2000 the DPP's candidate won the presidency — a peaceful transfer fourteen years after the party's founding — and power has alternated since: 2000, 2008, 2016, and a divided government in 2024. Party competition in Taiwan has been intense, sometimes bitter, and conducted in the open. The polity did not split.

Two qualifications keep this case honest. First, Taiwan's unresolved status dispute predates the DPP by decades and persists today; it is a question of national identity and sovereignty, not a product of party competition. That is precisely the distinction this essay insists on. Second, the presence of opposition parties did not by itself guarantee democratic quality — a point CCE-114 makes through the concept of competitive authoritarianism: elections plus opposition parties, on a profoundly uneven playing field, do not add up to democracy.

5. Case two: Scotland — a separatist party that competed, lost, and accepted it

If Taiwan tests whether competition divides a polity, Scotland tests the harder version: what happens when the opposition party *is itself* a separatist party, whose stated purpose is independence?

The Scottish National Party, founded in 1934, won a majority in the Scottish Parliament in 2011 on a pledge to hold an independence

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referendum. Under the Edinburgh Agreement of 15 October 2012 between the Scottish and United Kingdom governments, the vote was held on 18 September 2014. Turnout was 84.6 percent. The result was 55.3 percent against independence and 44.7 percent in favour. The SNP's leader conceded defeat the same day, saying Scotland had "by a majority decided not at this stage to become an independent country" and that he accepted "that verdict of the people." Seven months later the SNP won 56 of Scotland's 59 seats in the UK Parliament — and the United Kingdom remained intact.

Scotland is the mirror image of the myth: a party openly seeking separation competed, lost a lawful vote, accepted the result, and kept competing. What kept the country together was not the absence of a separatist party but the presence of an agreed procedure: a lawful vote, a clear question, and losers who accepted the outcome. The violent dissolutions of the twentieth century, by contrast, were driven by armed territorial conflict and collapsing central authority — conditions in which the absence of opposition parties did nothing to prevent the split.

6. Where the other side has a point

None of this shows opposition parties are harmless; the white paper's warning is real. Competition *can* be destructive: when parties treat every election as existential, losers refuse to accept results, campaigns are fought on identity rather than policy, and winners use victory to lock opponents out, division deepens. CCE-114's caution applies: counting parties is not enough; what matters is whether losers can realistically win next time.

But notice what this concession actually establishes. It establishes that *unregulated, winner-take-all* competition can aggravate division — not that the existence of opposition parties necessarily causes it. The dividing line is institutional: can losers accept defeat because they expect a fair next round? Can winners be removed? Is there a lawful route for identity

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questions — a referendum, a constitutional process — so that they need not be settled by force?

7. Conclusion: a better question

"Does the existence of opposition parties necessarily cause national division?" No — necessarily is doing all the work in that sentence, and the record does not support it. The white paper describes a system containing eight other parties and warns against *both* unregulated competition and rule without oversight. Taiwan shows party competition intensifying without the polity splitting. Scotland shows even a separatist party competing, losing lawfully, and accepting the result.

The better question is therefore not whether opposition parties exist, but under what rules they compete. Three questions apply the distinction: can an opposition party register and contest elections lawfully? If it wins, can it take power — and if it loses, does it accept the result? And when the dispute is about identity or territory rather than office, is there a lawful procedure for deciding it? Answer yes to all three, and a country can have opposition parties without national division; answer no, and it will have division with or without them.

CCE link-back

This topic overlaps directly with **CCE-114, "What Does the Existence of Opposition Parties Mean for Political Health?"**, which distinguishes opposition parties, parties out of power, and participating parties, and tests the functions of opposition parties against the cases of Taiwan (1986–2024), the PRC's 2021 white paper, and the 1998 China Democracy Party registration attempt. Readers should consult CCE-114 for that fuller treatment; this essay cites it and does not duplicate it.

- CCE-114 (canonical EN edition, verified live 2026-11-20): https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-cce-114-opposition-parties-political-health/

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Sources

1. State Council Information Office, *China's Political Party System: Cooperation and Consultation* (June 2021) — full text landing page: http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/whitepapers/2021-06/25/content_77587473.htm ; Preamble: http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-06/25/content_77587473_2.htm ; Section IV: http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-06/25/content_77587473_6.htm — all read live 2026-11-20. Every quotation in this essay was checked verbatim against these pages.
2. CCE-114, "What Does the Existence of Opposition Parties Mean for Political Health?" — canonical EN edition (see CCE link-back above), read live 2026-11-20. Taiwan dates and the competitive-authoritarianism point are cited from this article.
3. 2014 Scottish independence referendum — result (No 55.3%, Yes 44.7%), turnout 84.6%, Edinburgh Agreement 15 October 2012, SNP 2011 majority: Yale Macmillan Center, "SNP falls short of a majority in Scottish election but aiming for independence referendum," https://macmillan.yale.edu/stories/snp-falls-short-majority-scottish-election-aiming-independence-referendum ; corroborated by IFES Election Guide, https://electionguide.org/elections/id/204/?'report_type=custom — both retrieved 2026-11-20.

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