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FORMOSA: POLITICAL POTPOURRI

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The Nationalist Government on Formosa has been called "the best government in Asia"; it has also been bitterly denounced, by the last Governor of the island, as a "police state." There is an element of truth in both of these extreme statements, but pat labels are not adequate to describe the political complexities and subtleties of a regime which defies simple classification.

One finds on Formosa elements of traditional Chinese paternalism and autocracy, Soviet mass organization and political control, and Western parliamentary and representative government. It is not surprising that such a political potpourri confuses many observers and results in disturbingly contradictory descriptions of the regime.

The realities of political power and influence on Formosa cannot be found in constitutional documents or organizational charts. On paper the Nationalists' Republic of China is a parliamentary form of government, which blends old Chinese institutions with ideas borrowed from both the British cabinet system and the American presidential system, into the "Five Yuan" Nationalist structure. On the other hand, the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, is a Leninist mass organization based upon "democratic centralism." But neither of these facts is the essential clue to the situation on Formosa. The most important political fact in Nationalist China today is the dominating personality of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, President of the Republic of China, "Leader" of the Kuomintang, and the real locus of all basic power and influence in the Nationalist regime.

On September 21st I met the "Gimo" in his office, situated in the huge red-brick Ministry of National Defense building which towers over the center of Taipei. I had requested an "interview"; I was granted an "audience." Generalissimo Chiang, dressed in an austere "Sun Yat-sen suit," appeared to be the epitome of mild-mannered simplicity, but for all of his mildness, the force of his personality and authority emanated from him like

a visible current and dominated all of those in the room.

Loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek is the mortar which cements the varied elements in the Nationalist regime and keeps the political structure intact. Chiang's role and influence have increased rather than decreased in the last five years, and he is now the "indispensable man," whose overlordship is recognized even by persons who do not like him. The personal loyalty which he demands and receives is really the principal element uniting the many conflicting personalities and philosophies which are part of the regime. Clique politics are much less important among the Nationalists now than they were a few years ago; political prestige and influence at present depend primarily upon the patronage of Chiang Kai-shek himself rather than upon lesser political lights. Chiang's personal Presidential Office is in reality a sort of government-within-a-government where key decisions are made, and it overshadows both the Executive Yuan, which is the governments' cabinet, and the Standing Committee of the Kuomintang. Generalissimo Chiang is not a demagogue, in the modern totalitarian sense; he stays in the background and only rarely makes public appearances. But he is the center of a leader cult. He seems to think of himself in old Confucian terms as a one-man ruler who carries the burden of governmental responsibility and has the right to demand absolute personal loyalty in return. The scope of affairs which he himself handles is remarkable. It is significant that he passes on the appointments of, and has personal interviews with, virtually all army officers of the rank of colonel and above, as well as civil officers of comparable rank; he also interviews almost all persons of any rank going abroad on government missions, and tries to talk with every party member attending an indoctrination school. In short, he attempts to create a personal link with all officials of any stature in his regime,

The dominating force of Chiang Kai-shek's personality is probably a short-run source of strength to the Nationalists, because he has been able to pull together the regime and minimize internal cleavages and disunity. But it may well be a long-range source of weakness, for he inhibits creativeness and initiative among his subordinates, stifles the growth of other leadership, and hinders the development of political organizations with real vitality. When Chiang passes out of the picture (he appears in good health now, but he will be 67 years old this month), the Nationalist regime is likely to undergo a traumatic experience, and the shock of losing "the Leader" may result in extreme confusion and possible disintegration. If Chiang were to die tomorrow, Nationalist China would be greatly weakened; but in time this could prove to be a blessing, because out of the confusion might develop new leadership, ideas, and organization--all of which are now suppressed by the brooding, dominating personality of "the old man."

The Kuomintang party organization under Chiang is--as it has been since 1924--a Soviet-style organization which, despite concessions made to Western ideas of multi-party democracy, still

operates on the basis of a philosophy of inner-party discipline and one-party control. The two other political "parties" in Nationalist China--the young China Party and Social Democratic Party--are window'dressing with very little real significance.

Top Nationalist leaders blame past failures more upon their inability to create a unified, disciplined mass party than upon the political philosophy justifying such a political organization; and since coming to Formosa they have tried to tighten discipline, improve organization, sharpen ideological principles, and implement the whole conception of "democratic centralism." From September 1950 to October 1952, a special Reform Committee set out to strengthen the party. It weeded out inactive membership, recruited new members from the local population, redefined the party's ideological basis, attempted to improve the grass-roots organization, grouped the membership into more effective cells, and embarked upon an extensive reindoctrination program.

The Seventh Party Congress, in October 1952, elected the present 32-member Central Committee and 10-member Standing Committee. The Standing Committee meets weekly, and there is no doubt that next to the President's Office it is currently the most important policymaking organization on Formosa. Its decisions are passed on to the rank-and-file membership--which according to one member of the Standing Committee is now said to total some, 600,000 on Formosa, of whom about one-half are local Formosans, (This membership claim may be exaggerated),

A majority of the key appointive jobs on Formosa are held by Kuomintang members. With a few notable exceptions, most important elective positions are also filled by Kuomintang people. One hsien (county) magistrate, for example, told me that it is almost essential to be a member of the local party committee to be elected a magistrate. At present, 80 per cent of the national legislative Yuan's members and 42 of 53 members of the Taipei Municipal Council are Kuomintang men; this is the general pattern in representative bodies.

The Kuomintang, however, is by no means such a monolithic organization as the Communist Party, in China or elsewhere, even though it is modeled organizationally on similar lines. In Formosa, despite the efforts to tighten party discipline, individual and group differences of opinion--even among party members--do make themselves felt to a degree in the deliberations of representative bodies; and nonparty people do fill some very important posts and have an influence which would be impossible in a thoroughly totalitarian regime.

The government administration run by the party on Formosa is a complicated, top-heavy bureaucracy, because the superstructure of a national government has been imposed upon a provincial government, and there are consequently two layers of administration with authority over the same limited territory. This duplication is justified, of course, on the basis of the Nationalists' hope to return to the mainland, but it means that

the burden of government is a heavy one. One indication of how heavy a burden it is lies in the fact that in urban areas on the island--according to one careful American survey--roughly one-fourth of all housing is occupied by civil servants who receive their quarters rent-free from the government. An extraordinarily large number of people on Formosa are completely dependent upon the government and receive social and economic security in return for dependency,

The character of the government bureaucracy has vastly improved, however, since the Nationalists' last days on the mainland. The quality of administration, in terms of lack of major corruption and improvement of relative efficiency, may well justify--in one sense at least--the label "best government in Asia" which has been applied by some to it,

It is also true that the forms of representative government have been steadily introduced, and the participation of local Formosans has gradually increased. At present, the election of councils and executives at hsien and municipal levels, and of a representative body at the provincial level, are genuine elections, and the majority of persons selected are local Formosans. But the fact that there is really only one political party means that the elections are not contests in the Western sense. The surprise election of a non-Kuomintang Formosan as mayor of the capital city of Taipei shows that the forms of democratic elections are being adhered to, but the fact that he was a notable exception to the general rule indicates that democratic processes do not have a strong base,

The fact is that despite concessions to democratic forms, no real organized opposition to Chiang Kai-shek or the Kuomintang is tolerated. In recent months the degree of criticism of minor government policies which is allowed has increased considerably, but any significant opposition to the political status quo--even on the part of people who are staunchly anti-Communist--runs the risk of being called subversive. And there is an extensive apparatus which gives substance to the charges that the Nationalist regime is in some respects still a "police state."

Few, if any, Americans on Formosa fully understand the complicated police system existing on the island. In addition to the provincial police force, which contains about 20,000 men, there are perhaps 10 or 12 interlocking or overlapping organizations with secret police functions; altogether they are estimated to have anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 members. They include the Peace Preservation Corps which deals with internal security, the Foreign Affairs Police which keep watch on foreigners, the Ministry of National Defense Security Protection Bureau and Political Department, the Ministry of Interior's Bureau of Investigation, the secret service of the Kuomintang's 1st Section, the Materials Collection Section of the Presidents' Office, and so on. The existence of so many secret police agencies is justified by the threat of subversion, but in fact it is also supported by the political philosophy of the dominant Kuomintang hierarchy, and the

secret police would probably exist even if the possibility of subversion were less real than at present.

The police apparatus on Formosa does not, however, impinge upon, or interfere with, the lives of ordinary people to the extent that the secret police organization of a Communist state does. Many people living on the island have little or no contact with the secret police, and some are blissfully unaware of its existence. But there is no doubt that police activities do create fear and stifle both independent political activity and unorthodox political opinion.

For a period immediately after the Nationalists came to Formosa, Communist infiltration and subversion constituted a serious problem, but by 1951 the back of the Communist underground appeared to be broken. Arrests, secret trials by military courts, and some executions have continued, however. Although exact figures are impossible to obtain, one reputable source estimates that last year secret police formally arrested (some of these "arrests" actually dated back to previous years, so the figure for 1953 itself would be smaller) about 6,000 persons and executed over 200 (some of these, also, were convicted in past years). Many of those convicted or executed were clearly Communist agents and subversive, but there is little doubt that the arrests included persons merely suspected of undesirable political activity. And although the procedures used in military trials have been improved (civilians on trial can now obtain legal counsel, for example), lax rules of admissible evidence leave room for much error and injustice.

What all of these facts indicate is that the apparatus of "police state" organization and methods does exist on Formosa, but at present it is being used with some restraint. The screws of the political vise are well oiled, but they do not appear to be tightened, at least for the moment.

The coexistence of liberal democratic elements and totalitarian elements on Formosa is a peculiarity of the Nationalist regime. One group of leaders is clearly authoritarian in its whole outlook. Chiang Kai-shek's eldest son, Chiang Ching-kuo-- who derives his influence to a large extent from his father's support--symbolizes this group, which exercises its authority through the party, the army's Political Department, the Youth Corps, the secret services, and similar organizations. The other group, which includes many of the top administrators in the government, reflects the influence of the Western democratic approach to politics. The United States, although deeply involved in almost every aspect of the Nationalist regime, does not actively interfere in the internal political situation; but the sympathy of Americans for nonauthoritarian personalities helps to maintain a certain balance between the two groups, although it has not basically affected the power of those who exercise authoritarian controls.

Outside of the realm of organized politics there have been some recent developments at a town and village level which hint at the growth of institutions which could ultimately broaden the base for local democracy. Several types of nonpolitical organizations have slowly developed from centrally-controlled bureaucratic bodies into institutions based upon local initiative and control. Notable among these are the farmers' associations. There are now 341 of these, elected and run by their own membership, and they are becoming increasingly active and important. The 22 local health centers and 363 health stations, supported and managed by local constituents, provide another example of growing initiative at a grass-roots level. The fact that the government has tolerated, and even encouraged, development of such organizations provides a contrast **with** Communist China, across the Formosa Strait, where every effort has been made to bring all forms of local organization under complete political control. But, on Formosa, these local organizations still have a negligible role in the field of organized politics.

How do the people on Formosa feel about Nationalists and their regime? The majority of local Formosans still regard the Nationalist Government as a group of outsiders, but there is now little hostility--even though there is considerable resentment--directed toward the government. Most mainlanders, who came to the island in 1949, accept the Nationalist Government and look to it as the focus of their hope to return ultimately to their homes, across the Formosa Strait. There is not much opposition to the regime, therefore, even though enthusiasm about it is not dramatically conspicuous either,

By comparison with people living in many other areas of Asia, one might say that ordinary citizens under the Nationalist regime on Formosa have a considerable amount of personal freedom, an increasing number of formal political rights, relatively little real political freedom, and a negligible amount of genuine political power or influence.

If asked to make a choice between their present government and a Communist regime, however, the people on Formosa undoubtedly would support the existing status quo. And the aim of American policy, also, is to support, and attempt to strengthen, the status quo.

But what of the future? The present Nationalist regime is not one which is really developing dynamic and creative new political ideas. Essentially, its structure is rigid, its base is narrow, and it looks to the past rather than to the future. There is little significant experimentation on Formosa in ways to apply democratic processes in Asia, to broaden the base of political power, or to nurture new political leadership. Few effective steps are being taken to liberalize the regime in a way which might attract the support of non-Communist Chinese outside of Formosa or appeal to disaffected, anti-Communist elements on the mainland.

U.S. policymakers obviously are reluctant to exert direct influence on the internal political situation on Formosa, even though U.S. involvement in the regime is so great that indirect, influence is unavoidable; tampering with Nationalist politics might weaken the government, it is feared, and the aim of U.S. policy is to help create a "situation of strength." But even though the Nationalist Government is more effective, more purposeful, and stronger than it was five years ago, one cannot help but wonder--if one takes a long-range view--whether a political structure such as that of the Nationalists holds any key to the future or is merely a renovated relic of the past.

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