

# MP-IDSA

## Commentary

# The Total Failure of the Recall Campaign in Taiwan

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## Summary

The defeat of the recall motions against opposition KMT parliamentarians can be interpreted as the Taiwanese people's message to the government to reconsider its security discourse.

The defeat of the recall motions against seven opposition Kuomintang (KMT) parliamentarians—members of the Legislative Yuan (LY), on 23 August, brought the intense recall campaign, which some civil society groups had spearheaded since January this year, against KMT parliamentarians to an end.<sup>1</sup> The campaign had failed when 24 KMT parliament members survived the recall votes on 26 July.<sup>2</sup> The 23 August results have sealed a comprehensive defeat. The defeats of the recall motions were by convincing margins. Most of the ‘Yes’ votes not only trailed the ‘No’ votes by wide margins but also failed to secure the mandatory 25 per cent benchmark of eligible voters in the electoral districts.<sup>3</sup>

## The Background

The failed campaign resulted from new power dynamics flowing out of the January 2024 general elections. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a party perceived as favouring seeking *de jure* independence from China, retained its hold on the presidential office for a third straight term. After two terms by Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 and 2020, Lai Ching-te won the presidential election. However, after eight years, the DPP lost its grip over parliament to the combined opposition—the KMT with 52 seats and the smaller party Taiwan’s People’s Party (TPP) with eight seats. This development gave significant ballast to the opposition, particularly the KMT, which has controlled the local governments since 2018 but had otherwise been on the island’s macropolitical margins.

The situation soon led to a massive showdown between the government and the opposition. Their first standoff took place on the issue of amendments to the Act Governing the Legislative Yuan’s Power, by which the opposition sought to criminalise ‘contempt of parliament’ among other things.<sup>4</sup> The government termed it a parliamentary usurpation of powers. People aligned with the government and ruling party’s thinking hit the streets and launched the Bluebird Movement in May 2024. Later, in October 2024, the Constitutional Court declared the amendment unconstitutional.

Things came to a head when the opposition succeeded in amending the Public Officials Election and Recall Act (POERA), the Constitutional Court Procedure Act (CCPA), and the Act Governing the Allocation of Government Revenues and Expenditures (AGAGRE) in December 2024. The last two hit the government

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<sup>1</sup> Lai Yu-chen, Yeh Su-ping, Wang Yang-yu and Christie Chen, “[All 7 KMT Lawmakers Survive Recall, Opposition Bloc Keeps Majority](#)”, *Focus Taiwan*, 23 August 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Edric Huang, “[Democracy in Taiwan’s Streets](#)”, Institute of Current World Affairs, 25 July 2024.

especially hard. The CCPA raised the bar significantly higher for hearing and deciding a case by increasing the required quorum. The required quorum was made even more stringent in cases touching on the constitutionality of legal provisions. Moreover, immediately after these amendments, the opposition rendered the Constitutional Court functionally defunct by denying LY confirmation to the appointments of seven judges whom the government appointed against some vacancies. This move left the Constitutional Court with inadequate numbers that could not provide the required quorum for hearing the cases.

Furthermore, the AGAGRE changed the ratio of annual budget allocation between the central government and local governments by increasing the latter’s share. The opposition asserted that the amendments ensured judicial independence from the government’s purported influence and rewarded local governments, the primary revenue source. On the other hand, the government accused the opposition of paralysing governance and blamed it for compromising Taiwan’s security by creating a financial crunch for the central government.<sup>5</sup>

In this background, civil-society groups aligned with the ruling formation’s views launched the recall movement against KMT lawmakers in January 2025. Recall motions were eventually admitted against 31 out of 52 KMT lawmakers, 24 of whom were put to a vote on 26 July and the remaining seven on 23 August. There was no recall motion against the Taiwan People’s Party’s (TPP) eight LY members, as they were elected under the “national-at-large” category of seats through the closed party list system.<sup>6</sup>

## Reading between the Lines

The opposition’s action has been motivated by its desire to increase its say in policy matters. The KMT dominates most local governments, which helps it push its agenda and programme. Therefore, it has a stake in increasing its share of the annual budget. The opposition also appeared to be guided by considerations of self-preservation. In recent years, Taiwan has seen a sharp polarisation. Any voice that is critical of politically dominant views on China runs the risk of being termed as a ‘CCP collaborator’ and a ‘traitor’ in public discourse. Thus, the KMT, which believes in eventual reunification, is heavily denounced in juxtaposition to the ruling DPP’s supposed ‘pro-independence’ proclivities. It is vehemently castigated for its civil

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the background of the recall campaign, see, Prashant Kumar Singh, “[The Recall Campaign and Political Polarisation in Taiwan](#)”, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 10 June 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Wu Yi, “[Results and Analysis of the 2024 Taiwan Legislative Yuan Elections](#)”, CSIS, 1 February 2024; “[4. What is the Electoral System Adopted for the Legislative Election?](#)”, Central Election Commission.

exchanges and political contacts with Mainland China, inviting a ‘collaborationist’ and ‘out-to-sell-Taiwan’ diatribes against it.<sup>7</sup>

Taiwan is witnessing an intensified ‘national security discourse’. Instituting legal countermeasures against supposed collaborators and infiltrators carrying out so-called ‘United Front threats’ on behalf of communist China is at the core of this discourse.<sup>8</sup> The opposition apprehends that the ruling establishment wants to treat cross-Strait policy as its exclusive preserve and curtail the opposition’s space in it. It also accuses the judiciary of complicity with the executive, thus undermining judicial independence.<sup>9</sup> The TPP accuses that its former Chairperson, Ko Wen-je, who is in prison under corruption charges, is a political victim.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the opposition seems to be preemptively safeguarding its political turf by introducing significant changes to the CCPA. On the other hand, the ruling DPP appeared to be keen on ousting the opposition, then winning the subsequent by-elections and regaining its parliamentary majority.

## Interpreting the Recall Vote Mandate

The entire recall campaign was conducted on a heavy anti-China plank. However, the campaigners tried to adjust it and bring development-related issues into the debate after the debacle in the first round on 26 July.<sup>11</sup> Although civil society groups supposedly ran the campaign, the DPP’s footprint on the campaign was too large to miss. There remains a difference of opinion about the degree to which the campaigners received support from the DPP regarding organisational support and coordination. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore a connection between them. The chatter that the recall option exists and can be exercised began early on after the fractured mandate for the LY emerged in January 2024.<sup>12</sup> After the three amendments, a DPP press release on 20 December 2024 mentioned this option.<sup>13</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> Medwin Hsu, “[UMC Founder Tsao Calls Taiwan Mass Recall A Stand against Beijing](#)”, *Taiwan News*, 18 June 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Prashant Kumar Singh, “[Taiwanese Assessments and Responses to ‘United Front’ Threats](#)”, Issue Brief, MP-IDSA, 4 June 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Chung, “[Taiwan’s Opposition Parties Hit with Lawsuit Over Failed Joint Election Deal](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 5 December 2023; “[111 K.O.! 150,000 Filled Liberty Square in a Non-Partisan Rally to Defend Judicial Justice](#)”, Taiwan People’s Party Website, 15 January 2025; Chen Cheng-yu and Jason Pan, “[KMT Complaints of Persecution are Groundless: DPP](#)”, *Taipei Times*, 17 April 2025.

<sup>10</sup> “[Taiwan People’s Party Press Release: No Justice No Democracy. Free KP](#)”, Taiwan People’s Party, 27 December 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Medwin Hsu, “[DPP Prospects for Recall Vote Dimmed by Previous Failure](#)”, *Taiwan News*, 22 August 2025.

<sup>12</sup> “[Taiwan’s Recall Movement: Power Play or Popular Outrage?](#)”, *Focus Taiwan*, 27 March 2025.

<sup>13</sup> “[To Block KMT’s Three Political Chaos Bills, It was Necessary to Enter the Legislative Chamber to Protect Democracy](#)”, Press Release, DPP Website, 20 December 2024.

January 2025, the DPP legislative caucus whip Ker Chien-ming openly appealed for exercising the power to recall.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, President Lai threw his weight behind the campaign in June 2025.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there was an unmistakable synchronisation between the campaigners’ and DPP’s goals and rhetoric.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, it is fair to consider the outcome of the recall motions on the level of politics and political discourse. One can legitimately argue that the political use of the constitutional recall provision to this magnitude did not convince Taiwanese voters. The right to recall was perhaps envisaged for use in localised contexts, not as a tool for the wholesale ouster of the opposition from the parliament. Therefore, they did not see any reason to change the mandate they gave in January 2024.

Since the failed recall campaign was based on fervent anti-China and anti-KMT sentiments, with the latter being labelled as a local ‘collaborator’ who was ‘out to sell Taiwan to China’, one could reasonably conclude that the Taiwanese did not subscribe to the rhetoric as well. One could also infer that the opposition’s critique of the government’s style of functioning and concerns about potential negative implications of anti-‘United Front threat’ measures for internal freedom and rule of law may have resonated with the electorate.<sup>17</sup>

The results could also indicate the Taiwanese people’s desire to preserve the fragile peace and status quo in the Taiwan Strait. After living through a precarious phase of cross-Strait relations under DPP’s Chen Shui-bian from 2000 to 2008, they supported KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou’s ‘no unification, no independence and no use of force’ slogan in the 2008 presidential elections.<sup>18</sup> The student-led Sunflower Movement, which occupied the parliament building for 24 days, erupted in 2014, demanding that the “government...draft and implement a legislative mechanism for the review of cross-Strait agreements”, when people felt uneasy about the pace of cross-Strait integration under Ma.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, many Taiwanese people may be motivated to view the counter United Front measures as a double-edged sword. The ruling party’s polemics seem to be perceived as exceeding reasonability. They could see a point in the opposition’s assertion that

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<sup>14</sup> “[Taiwan’s Recall Movement: Power Play or Popular Outrage?](#)”, no. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Yeh Su-ping, Wen Kuei-hsiang, Wang Cheng-chun and Shih Hsiu-chuan, “[Lai Urges DPP to Back Recall Campaign Targeting KMT Lawmakers](#)”, *Focus Taiwan*, 28 June 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Hsieh Chun-lin, Chen Yun and Jason Pan, “[Robert Tsao Passes on Torch for Next Recall to DPP](#)”, *Taipei Times*, 28 July 2025.

<sup>17</sup> “[Taiwan’s Lai Ching-te Tied up by Political Chaos after Year in Office](#)”, *The Japan Times*, 19 May 2025; “[75 Scholars Criticize Lai’s Populism, Freedom of Speech Erosion](#)”, *Focus Taiwan*, 26 March 2025.

<sup>18</sup> “[Presidents since 1947: 12th - 13th terms Ma Ying-jeou](#)”, Office of the President, Republic of China, Taiwan; Ralph Cossa, “[Looking behind Ma’s ‘Three Noses’](#)”, *Taipei Times*, 21 January 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Rowen, “[Inside Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement: Twenty-Four Days in a Student-Occupied Parliament, and the Future of the Region](#)”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 10–11.

Taiwan runs the risk of sleepwalking into a quasi-state of war with Mainland China. Hence, they have rejected the political manipulation of a constitutional provision to eliminate the opposition and conveyed that they prefer political oversight of government actions.

## Implications and Conclusion

One could say that the ruling formation in Taiwan has overplayed its hand. It received a massive jolt to its standing, which had remained unassailable in the last ten years in many ways. One needs to monitor political developments in the coming months and years, particularly local elections late next year, to understand the future course of Taiwanese politics. At present, the outcome may unsurprisingly embolden the opposition. Whether it will become even more non-cooperative and defiant remains to be seen, as does the government's willingness to work with the opposition. Interpreting the recall results as a rejection of the 'United Front' countermeasures would be a bit of a stretch. Nevertheless, while the government enjoys a benign public support for the measures to deal with challenges emanating from outside, concerns about potential negative domestic implications are difficult to overlook.

After the results of the recall votes, Lai has pledged "more dialogue with the opposition", while the KMT has also appealed for unity.<sup>20</sup> As a matter of priority, they should try to break the continuing deadlock on the issue of the appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court.<sup>21</sup> The triumphant opposition, particularly the KMT, should now show sagacity and magnanimity. On the other hand, the DPP government will have to strive hard to dispel the notion that it is politicising an external threat to score points in domestic politics. The government should review its security discourse, especially to determine whether it is counterproductive and causing concerns of internal disharmony.

Peace in the Taiwan Strait is so fragile that Taiwan cannot afford to allow such divisions to become deep-seated. To negotiate its security environment, it would always require the strength of the broadest possible societal unity.

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<sup>20</sup> Teng Pei-ju and James Thompson, “[Lai Pledges Cabinet Reshuffle, Dialogue with Opposition after Recall Votes, Referendum](#)”, *Focus Taiwan*, 23 August 2025; Wang Cheng-chung and Hsiao Hsu-chen, “[Opposition KMT Urges Unity and Reform after Recall Vote Victory](#)”, *Focus Taiwan*, 23 August 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Medwin Hsu, “[Legislature Rejects All of Lai's Judicial Nominees](#)”, *Taiwan News*, 25 July 2025.

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