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The Governmentality of Taiwan's Anti-epidemic Politics

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Taiwan has earned worldwide praise for its success in fighting the coronavirus crisis. It has become a shining example for those pushing the argument that state capacity in anti-epidemic politics is not preconditioned upon an authoritarian mode of government. Rather, the Taiwan case has shown that effective top-down policy steering, strict compliance of the populace with quarantine measures, hygiene measures and social distancing, and legitimate comprehensive tracing of digital data are all possible in a democracy.

Looking at the domestic and global discourses on Taiwan's anti-epidemic politics, we face a "master narrative" which emphasizes the combination of a high degree of state capacity and policy learning by government authorities, driven by civil society agency in a vital democratic system. This narrative privileges effective political leadership and accountability supported by overall public trust on the one hand and a high level of civic participation on the other. A "Taiwan model" of fighting the pandemic has come to the fore and is, as the Taiwanese government is happy to note, now being eagerly studied across the world.

However, is this all there is to the Taiwan case?

Looking more carefully at the domestic discourse, there is also a more "critical", non-mainstream narrative out there that ascribes Taiwan's performance in crisis management to the state's successful steering of the minds of the Taiwanese by invoking China's deadly threat as the real meaning of the coronavirus crisis. This invocation pinpoints "biopolitical nationalism" as a project of governmentality which arguably manipulates the people's crisis awareness for (Taiwan-) nationalist ends. Put differently, the coronavirus embodies the "China threat" and requires national mobilization to protect Taiwan's freedom and prosperity.
I came across this "critical" narrative on various occasions during the three months I spent in Taiwan between March and June last year. It was neatly summarized by a colleague of mine from a top-level academic institution who, it should be emphasized, is not a KMT-leaning intellectual but rather a DPP supporter. When we talked about Taiwan's successful crisis containment and its perception by the populace this colleague made a surprising statement:

"Look at us. We have so few infection cases here, but our government pretends that we are exposed to an existential threat. They nurture a sense of crisis and remind us all the time that we have to be on alert permanently. We do not question the government. Whatever they decide, the people go along, no questions, no thinking. They claim to be transparent, communicative, professional, democratic. Are they? What is all this 'crisis speak' really about? Of course, there is a virus out there. You have to be careful and do something about it. But is it just that? In fact, the government tells us: this is a national crisis, it is a deadly danger that comes from China. They have put us in a state of mental war, and a good part of the government's policy is just about Taiwanese nationalism and to get us prepared for the real war to come."

This viewpoint may have been an outlier at the time of our conversation last spring, but it has since, it seems, become more pronounced in the Taiwan public discourse. Even social and natural scientists are reflecting on Taiwan's anti-epidemic politics, indicating some uneasiness as informed observers of the way the country has moved through the pandemic. As far as I can see, the following arguments are being made:
- By invoking the Covid-19 outbreak as a national security crisis, border controls, travel bans and close-meshed digital surveillance (by tracking mobile phones and gathering comprehensive information of interconnected data pools, most notably those of the national immigration and health authorities), have infringed heavily on individual privacy and data security, with little tolerance for criticism. It seems that Taiwan is celebrating bio-surveillance, with no sense of any need to critically ponder the dangers of

of nearly unlimited official access to personal data.

– Constantly releasing information, coupled with monotonous advice and the threat of punishment, the government (the state) has created a censoring atmosphere in Taiwanese society that encourages all citizens to engage in morally supervising each other to behave "reasonably" and "responsibly". The state promotes mutual control in Taiwan's rural and urban communities, encouraging people to spy on their neighbor and make them report "black sheep" to nearby police stations, then lauding these unpaid spies as "caring citizens" in the local and national media.

– By bestowing exclusive authority and responsibility to the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Central Epidemic Command Center under its supervision, the government has monopolized decision-making processes around the existence of a public health emergency and the discussion on all the necessary counter-measures to be taken. With no democratic deliberation in Taiwan's parliament, there is almost no possibility to legally challenge these measures. This bespeaks a technocratic tendency in Taiwan's bureaucracy, if not the state's quest for technocratic power.

– This results in a "Foucauldian irony" embedded in the people's overall response to the government's strategy to fight the coronavirus. They embrace the state's political supremacy by telling themselves: "The more we are being controlled, the more we are in control! The more we are being controlled, the better we perform compared to other countries! The more we are being controlled and the better we perform compared to other countries, the more we are internationally applauded and recognized! The more we are being controlled, and the more we are internationally recognized, the more we are protected against China!" 1. Hence, the government has made good use of the pandemic for political ends and can easily withstand the opposition's accusation of becoming increasingly authoritarian.

There is no question that Taiwan has (so far) been successful in fighting the pandemic at home, with extremely low infection rates and only a handful of people having died. The "master narrative" accredits Taiwan's democratic system and healthy state-society relations to be the major causal factors behind this performance. I personally believe that this is a fair assessment. However, there are also questions, buoyed by the "critical narrative" that both the government and society should ponder. For example: has state power been strengthened too much by Taiwan's crisis response, to the detriment of the political and legal accountability of power-holders? Has individual freedom and critical inquiry of government action been compromised, if not manipulated, by a biopolitical project which serves Taiwanese nationalism? Has Taiwan's civil society lost much of its critical distance vis-à-vis the state during the coronavirus crisis?

1– I borrow here from de Kloet, Jeroen, Jian Lin and Yiu Fai Chow (2020). "We are doing better": Biopolitical nationalism and the Covid-19 virus in East Asia, in: European Journal of Cultural Studies, 23(4), 635-640.

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