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Chen Shui-Bian

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Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 was the fifth president of the Republic of China on Taiwan, serving from 2000 to 2008. He was the first candidate not affiliated with the Chinese Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT), ever to win the presidency, and his victory initiated the first peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another in Taiwan's history.

Origins

Colloquially known as A-Bian 阿扁, Chen Shui-bian was born in 1950 into a poor *benshengren* 本省人 (native Taiwanese) family in rural Tainan county. A bright child, he excelled at school and was admitted to National Taiwan University in 1969, where he majored in law and served as editor of the university's law review journal. He passed the national bar exam with top marks in 1972, and graduated with a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) in 1974 before beginning his career specializing in maritime law.

His entry into politics began after the December 1979 Kaohsiung 高雄 or Meilidao Incident 美麗島事件, when the leaders of the incipient *dangwai* 黨外 (“outside the party”) opposition movement were arrested by the KMT government for organizing pro-democracy protests. Chen volunteered to defend the *dangwai* members in their televised trials. Although all the defendants were eventually convicted and sentenced to long prison terms, Chen nonetheless gained prominence as a sharp-tongued and quick-witted advocate for the defense. In 1981, he parlayed his newfound fame into a successful election campaign for the Taipei city council. In 1985, he ran for magistrate of Tainan county, narrowly losing in a three-way contest. As he was thanking his supporters after the election, the driver of a truck struck his wife, Wu Shu-chen 吳淑珍, and then backed over her, leaving her paralyzed in an incident that has never been fully explained.

In 1986, Chen was convicted of defamation for an article published in a political magazine that he edited, and he served eight months in prison. While he was incarcerated, his wife ran in his place and was elected to a seat in the Legislative Yuan 立法院 (LY), the unicameral legislature of the Republic of China, under the banner of the newly founded Democratic Progressive Party 民主進步黨 (DPP). After Chen was released, he served as her legislative assistant, and in 1989 he was elected to the LY himself, quickly emerging as a leader of the DPP's legislative caucus.

Path to the Presidency

Chen's biography made him ideally suited to lead the DPP into the democratic era. His impoverished upbringing, *benshengren* family background, and personal sacrifices for the pro-democracy movement put him beyond reproach in the party, even as he sought to moderate the DPP's position on Taiwan independence and national identity issues to make it more electorally competitive.

Chen's rise to the presidency began in 1994, when he was elected mayor of Taipei, becoming the first non-KMT member to hold that office since the 1960s. He obtained less than 44% of the votes, but won by appealing to independents and maximizing turnout among the DPP's base, while two other candidates fought amongst themselves and split the KMT vote. His one term as Taipei mayor was pathbreaking. Chen's focus on mundane governance issues instead of ideology and national identity helped transform the DPP's image from that of a motley collection of rabble-rousing pro-independence radicals to a pragmatic party that could be trusted to respect institutional constraints and to wield power responsibly.

Despite high public approval ratings, Chen was defeated for reelection in 1998 by another future president, Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 of the KMT. Chen improved slightly on his vote share from 1994, but Ma won after consolidating the KMT vote behind his candidacy. Nevertheless, Chen remained popular in defeat, and shortly after leaving office he launched his campaign for president.

Presidency: First Term

In the 2000 presidential election, Chen was again the beneficiary of divisions within the KMT. After the popular former Taiwan provincial governor James Soong 宋楚瑜 was denied the ruling party's nomination, he ran as an independent against the party's official nominee, vice president Lien Chan 連戰. Chen edged out Soong, winning with only 39% of the votes. His victory ended the KMT's control of the central government, but he took office as a minority president: his narrow victory, combined with continued KMT control over the legislature, meant that he lacked a mandate to implement dramatic changes and had to seek compromises with the opposition to pass legislation.

On cross-strait relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), President Chen initially sought to reassure both Beijing and Washington that he would support the status quo. He pledged in his inauguration speech to uphold what became known as the ‘five no's’ (*si bu yi mei you* 四不一沒有, lit. four no's and one without) according to which his government would not seek to: (1), declare independence; (2), change the name of the country; (3), include in the constitution former president Lee Teng-hui's 李登輝 doctrine that cross-strait relations were “special state-to-state relations”; (4), promote a referendum on independence; or (5), abolish the National Unification Council 國家統一委員會, the now-defunct governmental agency tasked with overseeing Taiwan's reintegration with mainland China.

This moderate tone delivered few political benefits. Beijing remained deeply suspicious of Chen's intentions and unwilling to engage in serious political dialogue so long as the DPP remained in power. The KMT and Soong's People First Party 親民黨 (PPF) maintained a strategy of confrontation over cooperation so as to win back the presidency, and they blocked much of the DPP's policy agenda. Chen's pledge to support the cross-strait status quo also attracted criticism from many in the DPP's pro-independence wing, who wanted to see continued de-sinicization of the country's institutions and symbols and greater progress toward *de jure* independence.

As a consequence, in 2002, Chen changed strategy. He started making more explicitly ethnonationalist appeals to *benshengren* voters, and he accused the pan-Blue coalition 泛藍聯盟 (KMT-PPF) alliance of holding not only antidemocratic but also anti-Taiwan and pro-China positions. He also rallied public opinion behind a new Referendum Act 公投法 that would provide for popular votes on policy questions – a long-cherished goal of independence advocates. The opposition parties eventually supported the act, but only after inserting a threshold requirement of 50% turnout for referendums to pass, and a prohibition against holding votes on sensitive sovereignty issues.

Nonetheless, Chen still faced an uphill battle to win reelection. Lien declared his intention to run again, and convinced Soong to join his campaign as the vice presidential nominee. Since their combined share of votes in 2000 amounted to over 60%, this unity ticket made Lien the clear favorite in 2004. In an act of desperation, Chen used his authority under the new Referendum Act to call a “defensive referendum” against threats from the PRC to be held on the same day as the presidential election, which helped mobilize independence supporters behind his campaign.

On Mar 19, 2004, the day before the election, Chen and the vice president Annette Lu 呂秀蓮 were campaigning together in Tainan, when they were both shot and lightly wounded. Security forces were placed on high alert, but the voting went ahead the next day and proceeded smoothly. The final results showed a surprising, razor-thin margin of victory for Chen and Lu, who finished less than 30,000 votes ahead of the Lien-Soong ticket. Lien refused to concede and sued for a recount and nullification of the results, while claiming that Chen had staged the assassination attempt to win sympathy votes. Nevertheless, President Chen was inaugurated for a second term on May 20, 2004, while pan-Blue-led protests continued in the streets.

Presidency: Second Term

In his second term, Chen shifted toward increasingly nativist and pro-independence positions. He advocated for a new constitution, a “China to Taiwan” name rectification campaign, and Taiwan-centric reforms to the educational system. Chen's surprising reelection win raised DPP hopes that they could ride a rising tide of Taiwanese nationalism to victory in the December 2004 legislative elections. Instead, the pan-Blue camp won and consolidated its LY majority, ensuring that the political gridlock and divided government of Chen's first term would continue in his second.

In 2005, the first of several scandals engulfed the Chen presidency, destroying what remained of his image as a political reformer and corruption fighter. Chen and several family members and aides were accused of embezzlement, insider trading, and improper use of diplomatic expense accounts. A former DPP chairman, Shih Ming-teh 施明德, led huge street protests calling for Chen's resignation, and the pan-Blue opposition began impeachment proceedings in the legislature.

Chen refused to resign and, in the end, retained enough support among DPP legislators to block the impeachment attempt, but the scandals badly hurt the DPP. Dragged down by Chen's unpopularity and infighting between moderates and Taiwan independence fundamentalists, the party's candidates fared very poorly in the 2008 elections. Chen's old opponent Ma won over 58% of the votes for president, and the KMT captured nearly three-quarters of the seats in the legislature under a new, more majoritarian electoral system. The Chen era ended with the DPP defeated, divided, and demoralized, while the KMT appeared as politically dominant as at any point in the democratic era.

Post-Presidency

After President Chen left office, prosecutors immediately placed him under investigation, eventually bringing corruption charges against Chen, his wife, and several aides. In 2009, Chen received a life sentence and was fined about 6 million US dollars for embezzlement, bribery, and money laundering while president. As his health deteriorated in prison, he was released on medical parole in 2015, with the stipulation that he not participate in any political activities.

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