The Genesis of Responsible Government under Authoritarian Conditions: Taiwan during Martial Law*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the origin and subsequent institutionalization of governmental reforms in Taiwan during the 1950s and 1960s. It argues that such reforms helped strengthen the administrative accountability as well as the governing capacity of the Kuomintang regime during its authoritarian rule. A number of factors had contributed to this process. First and foremost was the role played by US aid and its conditionality. It served as a source of administrative innovation and external checks. At the same time, the measures prescribed by US aid revived the legacy of a technocratic mode of fiscal and economic planning which had never been able to perform its proper role during the turbulent

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* An early version of this paper was presented at the workshop “How Governments Become Responsible,” at the City University of Hong Kong, 1–2 March 2007. We are grateful for the comments from the participants. We thank particularly Linda Li, Ian Scott, and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive inputs.
years of the Republican period. Although the resulting reform measures were rather limited in scope, their effects were long-lasting in the post-war governance of Taiwan.

Is it possible for responsible government to evolve under authoritarian conditions? In its existing Western usage, responsible government is almost by definition democratically elected. It was once used as a synonym for parliamentary democracy. "Responsible government," wrote the British historian A. F. Pollard in 1926, "involves two things: firstly, the responsibility of the executive to the legislature, and secondly, the responsibility of the legislature to the people." However, in the present day, we know very well that such a government, though responsible to the people in a formalistic sense, may not be responsive to societal needs. This is particularly true when modern government as an institution amasses such immense power and resources that bureaucratic red tape, abuse of power, administrative secrecy, and so on inevitably become the quintessence of any state institution, and when governmental mistakes are exposed, bearers of government offices can easily hide behind the protective shield of collective responsibility. Worse still, it has become a kind of political ritual for leaders to vow to accept full responsibility for mistakes, since such rhetoric often enhances their popularity.

It is in this regard that restoring government responsibility is now seen as a much needed advocacy even in democratic countries. Some believe that greater responsibility can be achieved by technical fixes which enforce stricter political accountability, restore administrative ethics, and define clearer bureaucratic obligations. Others view such a rationalist idea of government responsibility as one which is bound to fail because it overlooks the paradox that demands for greater bureaucratic accountability to authoritative edicts almost invariably fail to achieve their intended results, namely, the satisfaction of public needs and the effective attainment of authoritative ends. Regardless of one’s position on this, the search for a more responsible government is in fact nothing new. It has been concern of hundreds of generations … before us. Decades ago an observer reminded us figuratively:

Magna Carta, the Declaration of Right, ship money, the Instrument of Government of Cromwell’s day, habeas corpus, the Bill of Rights — these are all tokens of a long English struggle for responsibility in government…. Even the devices of annual elections and a set term for parliaments are products of the long search.