



# SPOTLIGHT ON TAIWAN

*Mark Salter*



© 2021 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

International IDEA publications are independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board of Advisers or its Council members.

The maps presented in this publication do not imply on the part of the Institute any judgement on the legal status of any territory or the endorsement of such boundaries, nor does the placement or size of any country or territory reflect the political view of the Institute. The maps have been created for this publication in order to add clarity to the text.

References to the names of countries and regions in this publication do not represent the official position of International IDEA with regard to the legal status or policy of the entities mentioned.

Applications for permission to reproduce or translate all or any part of this publication should be made to:

International IDEA  
Strömsborg  
SE-103 34 Stockholm  
Sweden  
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00  
Email: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int)  
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

International IDEA encourages dissemination of its work and will promptly respond to requests for permission to reproduce or translate its publications.

Text editing: Accuracy Matters Ltd  
Design and layout: International IDEA based on originals by Phoenix Design Aid



## TAIWAN

**Regime type:** Mid-range performing democracy since 1996.

**State of emergency:** No state of emergency has been declared.

**Covid-19 democracy and human rights impact summary:** In 2020, Taiwan was one of the most successful countries in curbing the impact of the pandemic on public health and the economy. It acted swiftly on several fronts, from protecting the national stockpile of certain goods, such as digital thermometers and face masks, to imposing strict measures to control the spread of the pandemic locally. The Ministry of Health, led by an epidemiologist, had based its actions on experience from the SARS outbreak, as well as on data. As of May 2021, the authorities continue to impose both international and domestic travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus. In May 2021, Taiwan faced its worst outbreak since the beginning of the pandemic, with level 3 restrictions coming into force. Consequently, several establishments have been closed, including schools. Concerns have also been raised regarding Taiwan's SMS registration system, which critics argue could be used for mass surveillance purposes.<sup>1</sup>

### STORY OF SELF-RELIANCE AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

The contrast between the pandemic responses from Taiwan and its neighbour China is extreme. Where China has exemplified the strengths of an authoritarian command system in times of crisis, the Taiwan approach speaks strongly to the transparency, responsiveness and high degree of public trust that underlies its democratic governance-based approach. Despite its proximity to the source of the pandemic's outbreak, by autumn 2020 Taiwan had recorded fewer than 500 infection cases, only 7 deaths and no instances of large-scale community transmission—a remarkable achievement that gained the country wide-reaching international attention and recognition.

The irony of the situation was palpable—Taiwan was capable of this level of pandemic containment, despite its continuing exclusion from the World Health Organization (WHO) at China's insistence. If the pandemic has had one positive side, however, it is that Taiwan has acquired the precautionary habit of fending for itself. As a result, as early as January 2020, anticipating a national shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), with assistance from the charismatic Digital Minister Audrey Tang, the Taiwanese authorities moved to significantly increase domestic production of PPE and implement a national distribution system.

Taiwan's response has been also informed by the 2003 SARS outbreak, when it lost the third highest number of people after China and Canada—an experience that provided valuable lessons in the dos and don'ts of pandemic response, not least the importance of building dedicated institutional capacity.

### E-GOVERNANCE AT THE CENTRE OF THE RESPONSE

Taiwan prides itself as a centre of cutting-edge technological innovation, a quality readily on display in its pandemic response. A critical feature has been the integration of information from a range of national databases using its established e governance system. Among other things, this has assisted health authorities in tracing individuals with confirmed or suspected symptoms, based on a combination of their contact details and travel information. Such features of the Taiwanese pandemic response have led analysts to describe it as a regional exemplar of 'agile governance'—a quality organically linked, it can be argued, to well-functioning democratic institutions.

Keen to build on this, moving into spring 2020, the Government began putting out a simple message to the world: ‘Taiwan can help’. Beyond the sloganeering, however, perhaps the most salient and replicable ingredient of Taiwanese success is what one analyst calls its overall ‘deploy-in-advance’ strategy, whereby policies have been adopted ‘a step ahead of the pandemic’, notably via the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC).

---

## DEALING WITH DELTA VARIANT

After a long period of successful pandemic containment, however, by early May 2021 evidence of a powerful new infection wave emerged, reportedly originating from a group of China Airlines staff lodged at a hotel near Taiwan’s international airport. Within just a few weeks, Taiwan’s recorded infection rates surged from zero to quadruple digits—small in global terms but unprecedented in a place that had registered zero infections for a record 253 days between April and December 2020. In response, the authorities moved quickly to impose the toughest possible restrictions on freedom of movement, including the closure of many public spaces, although its relatively light-touch approach to testing emerged as a point of expert contention. On 7 June 2021, restrictions were extended until 28 June, eventually being scaled back in July on the back of evidence of declining infection rates, although the CECC indicated that prevailing restrictions would probably need to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

---

## CHALLENGES IN VACCINE SUPPLIES

At the same time, Taiwan struggled to play catch-up in acquiring vaccine supplies. While successful in clinching deals with UK and US producers and securing further vaccine deliveries from the USA and Japan—both of whom were on the receiving end of Taiwanese face mask donations in 2020—in late May 2021, President Tsai Ing-wen went public with allegations that China had been engaging in behind-the-scenes attempts to prevent completion of a deal with German manufacturers BioNTech. Beijing denied the accusation, despite reports that Pfizer/BioNTech had earlier signed an exclusive deal with a Shanghai-based company to distribute the vaccine in the ‘Greater China Region’. By late August 2021, Taiwan was reporting zero infection cases again, for the first time since April 2020—with over 800 people having died in the meantime—as well as significantly improved vaccination levels. Symbolically, too, in an event streamed via her Facebook page, in late August 2021 President Tsai received a shot of the first domestically produced Medigen vaccine—an exemplar of Taiwan’s self-reliance-based response to national challenges.

---

## PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN JANUARY 2020

Thus far, Taiwan’s only pandemic-era election was held on 11 January 2020, before a raft of social distancing and other precautionary measures had been introduced. It was an important electoral contest, however, setting incumbent Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) President Tsai against opposition Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Han Kuo-yu. Tsai won decisively, polling over 8 million votes (57 per cent)—the highest ever in Taiwan’s democratic history. Tsai is known for her tough line on relations with mainland China and an emphasis on the need for the Taiwanese to retain their separate identity, and her campaign was marked by repeated attacks on the KMT, alleging its willingness to accept a local version of China’s ‘one country, two systems’ relationship with Hong Kong.

---

## CONCERNS OVER TRACKING PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS

In contrast with many countries, Taiwan has not enacted state of emergency type legislation to date, and has been careful to ensure that restrictions were implemented in keeping with earlier constitutional court rulings—for example, precautionary moves to extend the New Year holiday in 2020. That said, there are continuing concerns over official collection of information regarding people's pandemic-era movements: specifically, smartphone-related software used to track individuals and hence infection transmission chains via contact tracing, and the potential centralization of databases containing official information on individual health and travel history.

Responding to these concerns, in late May 2020 Health Minister and CECC Head Chen Shih-chung claimed that the collected information could only be used for Covid-19-related investigations, and exclusively at the request of health authorities. People would be informed what type of information was being collected, he stated, its purpose and those responsible for its collection. Further, Chen stated that all information would be kept confidential and deleted after 28 days, and that further measures would need to be taken to ensure data security.

---

## TREATMENT OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Taiwan has a population that is approximately 95 per cent ethnic Chinese; however, there are an estimated 700,000 migrant workers, the majority from the Philippines and Indonesia. And while Taiwan rightly earns plaudits for many aspects of its democratic framework, its treatment of migrants remains problematic. 'If the ultimate measure of a society's character is its treatment of the most vulnerable,' one commentator suggested, 'Taiwan's human rights victories soar no higher than the abhorrent labor conditions—and a bipartisan disinterest in improving them—endemic in Taiwan's fishing, manufacturing and caregiving sectors.'<sup>2</sup>

While in February 2020 the authorities granted amnesty to undocumented foreign workers after an illegal Indonesian worker contracted the virus, domestic rights groups continue to argue that working conditions have not significantly improved and pressed the authorities to revise treatment regulations that allegedly still allow employers to dismiss foreign workers who become ill. Stung by recurring criticism, notably from Taiwan's ombudsman body that the authorities continued to show scant regard for the migrant labour force, in June 2021 the Ministry issued updated guidelines that required employers of migrant workers to implement Covid-19 prevention measures in their workplaces and dormitories.

---

## KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED AND ENGAGED

As part of a strategy for keeping the public informed of pandemic-related developments, since early January 2020 the CECC has been holding regular live-broadcast press conferences, both to provide information updates and tackle 'fake news' stories circulating on social media. Demonstrating a notable level of gender awareness, too, in response to news reports that a young boy feared he would be bullied in school if seen wearing a pink face mask—the only ones available at the time—all Ministers attended daily media briefings wearing pink face masks.

Additionally, the authorities continue to make extensive use of social media to keep people informed on issues such as facemask availability and to pursue a vigorous approach to fake news and other types of online disinformation. All government departments, for example, have been given the responsibility of responding to online disinformation by providing a so-called '2-2-2' 'memetic' (meme-based) response—within 20 minutes, in 200 words and containing 2 images. Supporting official efforts, the NGO Taiwan FactCheck Center has been cooperating with social media platforms to verify pandemic-related information posted online, as well as to educate the public in identifying and reporting fake news.

At the front of these initiatives is Audrey Tang, a software programmer and digital ‘hactivist’ who was appointed Digital Minister—Taiwan’s youngest-ever ministerial appointment—in 2016. Tang’s pandemic-directed contributions are an expression of wider efforts to use online tools to deepen digital democracy, notably by developing online means of deliberative popular participation—and hence trust—in decision-making. ‘It all comes down to clarity and transparency,’ Tang has commented: ‘You have to let the people know what the government is trying to do.’

This mission is pursued through initiatives such as vTaiwan<sup>3</sup> and Pol.is<sup>4</sup>, the latter an online tool that seeks to avoid unproductive polarization of opinion. The tool doesn’t include a reply button, the only option being to agree or disagree with a comment—the aim being to try and reach what Tang dubs ‘rough consensus’ on any given topic. It’s an approach that President Tsai’s consensus-oriented political style mimics, and one that features significantly in Taiwan’s overall pandemic response.

---

## ECONOMIC STIMULUS

Despite Covid-19’s economic impact, on the back of Taiwan’s containment successes, an initial GDP contraction morphed into reported growth of 5 per cent in the final quarter of 2020. In late February 2020, the legislature passed a TWD 60 billion (USD 2.17 billion) stimulus package. A little over a month later, Prime Minister Su Tseng-chang announced a further increase amounting to TWD 1.05 trillion (c. USD 36 billion), and in July 2020 vouchers were made publicly available via either purchase or special lotteries. Targeted at specific industries, notably in the agriculture and tourism sectors, the voucher’s chief aim was to boost the economic sectors worst hit by the pandemic. For reasons the Government failed to explain, however, foreign residents, including migrant workers, were not entitled to access the vouchers, which were snapped up by eager citizens.

---

## GROWTH IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In common with many countries in the region, Taiwan has registered a growth in domestic violence. One report from April 2020, for example, noted that, while national statistics were yet to be released, local media were indicating that overall numbers were up by 29 per cent for March alone. In response there was criticism of the fact that the authorities had yet to introduce policies to tackle domestic violence resulting from pandemic-induced social isolation.

---

## CHANGE TO LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Recognizing the need for dedicated legislation to deal with an unprecedented public health crisis, the Government sent a draft bill to parliament in late February 2020. The legislature rapidly passed the Covid-19 Special Act, with application limited up until 30 June 2021, after which extension would have to be approved by legislative resolution.

Article 7 grants the CECC power to implement all measures required for the purposes of disease prevention and control. Unlike well-stipulated provisions in the existing Communicable Disease Control Act, however, this provision gave the authorities wider powers, limited only by the requirement of ‘necessity’. Handing over such an apparent legal carte blanche has been criticized by some as mimicking authoritarian regimes. Sensitive, perhaps, to such criticisms, to date CECC has deployed this legal provision only infrequently.

---

## PANDEMIC AND MEDIA INTEGRITY

In line with its position near the top of regional press freedom rankings, pandemic-derived checks on media freedom remain essentially non-existent. If anything, a media-savvy Tsai administration has been keen to use (some might suggest, co-opt) local media to communicate pandemic-related developments—for example, by relaying the Health Ministry/CECC's regular broadcast press conferences. This approach extends to social media, which arguably plays an even more important role in official messaging than its mainstream media counterparts.

That said, there are marked differences in the way Taiwanese media have reported on the pandemic. Many of these differences can be traced to the ideological split between pro-Chinese and pro-independence factions represented by the two main political parties, the DPP and KMT, the latter inheriting the legacy of the former national leader Chiang Kai-shek.

Just as it has amplified existing tensions and divisions in many countries, the pandemic has sharpened differences between Taiwanese political parties and their respective supporters. Thus, where supporters of the 'pan-Green' coalition backing the DPP-led government routinely emphasize Taiwan's pandemic-related achievements and the positive press this has enjoyed abroad, media backers of the opposition 'pan-Blue' coalition maintain a vocal critique of President Tsai, notably for pursuing policies that allegedly undermine relations with mainland China.

---

## CORRUPTION

As befits a highly ranked country in Transparency International's global Corruption Perceptions Index, there is little open indication of consistently corrupt pandemic-related practices. That said, corruption cases, some of them high-profile, have continued to emerge, one of the most serious being that of five MPs from three political parties, the DPP and KMT included, charged with accepting bribes from the ex-Chairman of a major investment firm in violation of the 2007 Anti-Corruption Act—a case viewed by some as highlighting Taiwan's weak record on regulating political lobbying.

---

## ONLINE CIVIC ACTIVISM

Pandemic-era civic activism has been focused not on protest but efforts, through online initiatives, to keep the population informed on the availability of everything from face masks to toilet paper. Using what digital activists have described as a 'humour over rumour' strategy to combat fake news and disinformation, some have focused on producing memes to spread public awareness of positive behaviours. This novel approach has even managed to inject a note of humour into official communications, a notable example being a (successful) early effort to prevent a run on toilet paper sales via a cartoon video of the Prime Minister shaking his behind over the caption, 'After all, we all only have one pair of buttocks'.

### From International IDEA's Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights

- In May 2021, the CECC confirmed that the free SMS registration launched by the Government for retail stores and restaurants was not for mass surveillance but only for recording customers' contact information to trace contacts of confirmed Covid-19 cases. Furthermore, the records would be destroyed after 28 days. The CECC warned the public that anyone spreading false information about the pandemic would face a fine of up to TWD 3 million (USD 107,373), following online rumours that the SMS registration system was being used by the Government for mass surveillance.
- In June 2021, there were reports of ill treatment and harassment of foreign migrant workers, engaged in the electronics industry in particular, by their employers. In response, the Ministry of Labour stressed that employers

were obliged to follow migrant worker management guidelines. On 9 July, the Government announced that migrant workers in Taiwan would receive the same treatment as Taiwanese nationals in the national Covid-19 vaccination programme.

---

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> International IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2020 Indices and Global Monitor of Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights.
- <sup>2</sup> Aspinwall, N., 'Taiwan's human rights miracle does not extend to its Southeast Asian foreign workers', The Diplomat, 10 October 2019, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20210722164742/https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/taiwans-human-rights-miracle-does-not-extend-to-its-southeast-asian-foreign-workers/>>, archived 22 July 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> 'vTaiwan is an online-offline consultation process which brings together government ministries, elected representatives, scholars, experts, business leaders, civil society organizations and citizens. The process helps lawmakers implement decisions with a greater degree of legitimacy. It has various touch points such as a website (vtaiwan.tw), a combination of meetings and hackathons along with the consultation process' (<https://info.vtaiwan.tw/>).
- <sup>4</sup> 'Input Crowd, Output Meaning. Polis is a real-time system for gathering, analyzing and understanding what large groups of people think in their own words, enabled by advanced statistics and machine learning. Polis has been used all over the world by governments, academics, independent media and citizens, and is completely open source' (<https://pol.is/home>).



**International IDEA**  
Strömsborg  
SE-103 34 Stockholm  
Sweden  
+46 8 698 37 00  
[info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int)  
[www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)