

ELECTIONS

There is a fourth undeclared candidate in Taiwan: Communist China

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Taiwan's Foreign Minister, Joseph Wu, was holding a press conference on Tuesday, 9 January to draw attention to the danger of China interfering in the upcoming presidential election on the 13th. In the middle of the conference, the mobile phones of

everyone attending started to ring and the missile warning signal appeared. It was the exact moment China had chosen to launch one of its new satellites but the launcher directly flew over the main island of Taiwan.

The Ministry of Defence in Taipei immediately played down the threat: no missile alarm, just a civil space operation. Nonetheless, people are still afraid: only a few days earlier, on 1 and 2 January, Chinese spy balloons flew over Taiwan for the first time, identical to the ones that appeared in the skies over North America last year. It is evident, Beijing is putting pressure on Taiwanese voters before the presidential election in what it considers a 'rebel province' of China.

Three candidates this time, not the traditional two, will challenge each other in the upcoming election. The favourite is Lai Ching-te, current vice-president, former prime minister and a leading member of the Democratic Progressive Party, the left-wing formation most in favour of Taiwan's independence from China, in government since 2014. Lagging behind him (by about 10 percentage points, according to the polls at the end of December) is the current mayor of the Taipei metropolitan area, Hou Yu-ih, former police chief and exponent of the Kuomintang, the founding nationalist party of the Republic of China. He is more faithful to the One China principle and the '1992 Consensus', the principles governing relations between Beijing and Taipei: officially they are one country and Beijing is the capital, but Taiwan retains its de facto independence. Finally, there is also Ko wen-je, the former mayor of Taipei, an internationally renowned surgeon, an independent candidate since 2016, favoured by young people and with a campaign characterised by a very pragmatic approach on all issues.

Relations with China, besides being at the centre of international concerns, are also the main campaign issue. After the forced assimilation of Hong Kong into the Chinese system (in violation of agreements made with the UK on its autonomy), none of the three candidates presents themselves as 'pro-Beijing'. Instead they distinguish themselves by their approaches. Lai Ching-te would continue the same policy as the current president Tsai Ing-wen: a gradual but determined march towards independence from mainland China. Hou Yu-ih is a temporiser. Speaking to the Wall Street Journal, he describes his idea of relations with his neighbours on the basis of his experience as a police commander: 'Faced with an adversary, on the one hand you have to know how to negotiate, on the other hand you have to have the strength to fight'. The least predictable is the third candidate, Ko wen-je, who talks mainly about domestic issues and has changed his mind radically on foreign affairs. In the past he was pro-independence and supported Tsai Ing-wen. Since 2016 he has become an independent

politician and has taken a line closer to that of the Kuomintang: more relaxed relations, less independence rhetoric and more trade. He also proposes, if elected, to build a bridge to unite Quemoy Island with the Chinese mainland coast.

The Chinese Communist Party does not have a preferred candidate, but it does have a sworn enemy: Lai Ching-te. And it is pulling all the stops out to prevent him from being elected. Besides demonstrations of force (such as the spy balloons in Taiwanese airspace), it's predominantly making use of two main weapons: propaganda and the judiciary. Regarding the former, the Taipei authorities denounce a new wave of communist-branded disinformation, especially on social networks, all aimed at discrediting Tsai Ing-wen and her party. While the judiciary is working on the (numerous) contacts that exist between Taiwan and the mainland. It has suddenly put Foxconn, which operates in China but is owned by Taiwanese entrepreneur Terry Gou, under the microscope with a new investigation. In fact, the Chinese judiciary prevented him from running as an independent, when he could have split the Kuomintang consensus, to Lai's advantage. In another blow below the belt, the Shanghai authorities are also investigating the Taiwanese rock band Mayday, accusing it of lip-synching (which is apparently a crime in China...). The same group had previously refused to proclaim slogans in favour of the One China principle on its mainland tour.

So, in addition to the three official candidates, there will also be a fourth candidate in the Taiwan elections: the People's Republic of China. It is not aiming to take votes, but wants to ensure its enemies lose them.