

President Chen's Inaugural Speech: Paving the Way for a Sustainable Taiwan

Thursday, May 20, 2004,

Heads of States, Diplomatic Envoys and Foreign Dignitaries, Distinguished Guests, and Fellow Citizens:

Firstly, I wish to thank our honorable guests, at home and from abroad, who have joined us today for the Inauguration Ceremony of the 11th-Term President and Vice President of the Republic of China. What we have come together to witness are the progressive steps of Taiwan's democracy, as well as a story, written jointly by the 23 million people of Taiwan--one that is extraordinary and truly remarkable.

On this joyous occasion of national celebration, I will assume the solemn duty bestowed upon me by the people. At this moment, that which fills my mind is not eloquent words of glory and exaltation, but rather, weighty thoughts of bigger responsibility, greater humility, and deeper self-reflection.

In the final year of the twentieth century, Taiwan crossed a historic doorsill, completing an unprecedented transfer of power between political parties, and ushering in a new era in our nation's democratic development. In that time of change over--between the old and the new century--our fledgling democracy found itself stumbling down a rugged path of trial and tribulation. Taiwan's maiden voyage into the new century came wrought with turbulence as the old and the new, the weak and the strong, the emergence of crisis and the rise of opportunity--all came clashing into co-existence.

In the eyes of Chinese societies and other emerging democratic states, Taiwan's democracy embodies not merely a democratic experimentation; it signifies an exemplary success. The standard of democracy achieved in Western nations is the tried result through the test of time. In comparison, Taiwan's newfound democracy, after weathering rough waters, has burgeoned into an even more precious accomplishment. Our experience also serves as testament that democracy does not come ready-made, nor is it a Utopian ideal. There is no express train to transport us to the final destination. Democratic advancement occurs only through constant and gradual endeavor, one step at a time.

In the initial stage of Taiwan's democratization—from lifting of the martial law, complete re-election of the national legislature to direct presidential election—we have vested sovereignty with the people and began fostering Taiwan's national identity. In the second stage, a greater emphasis is placed on the establishment of a civil society and on the rebuilding of unity through a sense of shared destiny.

From increased community and civic consciousness to broader participation in public affairs and national policymaking--including the holding of a referendum, the rights and duties of citizens in a civil society have been affirmed and further improved; and thereby, the development towards a more matured, rational, and responsive democracy. We must seek to establish a civil society, and through joint participation and collective efforts, to create an identity with this land and a common memory if we are to transcend the limitations of ethnicity, lineage, language and culture, and to build a new and unified sense of shared destiny.

In today's society, issues of identity and ethnicity are a serious matter that cannot be denied or deliberately overlooked. My colleagues and I, in the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as the governing party, will lead the way in addressing such issues. We will take the first step and begin with candid self-reflection.

It was several hundred years ago that the generations before us traversed the "Black-water Channel" (Taiwan Strait) or crossed the great ocean to find a safe haven in Taiwan. No matter what year they arrived, regardless of their ancestral origins and their mother tongues, even in spite of their different hopes and dreams, all are our forefathers; all have settled down here and together faced a common destiny. Whether indigenous peoples or "new settlers," expatriates living abroad, foreign spouses or immigrant workers who labor under Taiwan's blazing sun--all have made a unique contribution to this land and each has become an indispensable member of our "New Taiwan" family.

Various ethnic groups, because of their disparate history and distinctive subcultures, understandably hold divergent views and values. Recognizing such inherent differences, we should embrace one another with more tolerance and understanding. The authoritarian government of the past exploited inequality among different ethnic groups, suppressing native languages and cultures. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that except for a few individuals in power, members of all ethnic groups have been victimized. The February 28 Incident and the "White Terror," of which the victims include both the "Ben-sheng" (Taiwanese) and the "Wai-sheng" (Mainlanders), were not historical representations of subjugation by ethnic groups, rather, abuse of power by a ruling government.

The fabric of Taiwan society today is comprised mainly of diverse immigrant groups. It is not a minority-ruled colonial state; hence, no single ethnic group alone should undeservingly bear the burden of history. Presently, regardless of one's birthplace--be it Guangdong or Taitung, regardless of the origin of one's mother--be it Vietnam or Tainan, and regardless of whether an individual identifies with Taiwan or with the Republic of China, per se, a common destiny has bequeathed upon all of us the same parity and dignity. Therefore, let us relinquish our differentiation between native and foreign, and between minority and majority, for the most complimentary and accurate depiction of present-day Taiwan is of a people "ethnically diverse, but one as a nation." A shared sense of belonging has become the common denominator among all the 23 million people of Taiwan.

This year's presidential election was marked by an exceedingly spirited campaign, hitherto unseen in history. The close results have prompted opposition parties to question the process and file legal charges contesting the results of the vote. As the incumbent president, I have, with the utmost sincerity, expressed my highest respect for the independence and fairness of our judicial system. I have also vowed to accept the result of its investigation regardless of the final outcome. It is my firm belief that abiding by and acceptance of the rule of law is the only conduit through which we can resolve conflicts--for, if we were to rebuke the trust placed by the people in Taiwan's democracy and independent judiciaries, then the end result would be that "everyone loses."

In a democratic system, scheduled elections are designed for the exercise of sovereignty by the people. They also provide a channel through which popular will and social values can be regularly reassessed. Fierce competition in the realm of politics forces politicians to undergo the most direct form of evaluation, which often serves as their greatest inspiration. My campaign, likewise, was subjected to rather tough scrutiny during the election, as was my administration, but

we have learned and improved as a result. In any election, sharp differences among competing political factions are inevitable. This could include contrasting ideologies, disparity in policy platforms, even variation in methods used to mobilize supporters. However, a democratic election is not equal to a "winner takes all" wager; nor should it lead to purposefully fueled antagonism among voters. The checks and balances system of multi-party politics constitutes a solid framework for democratic governance. An accountable governing party and a loyal opposition, together, represent the voice of the people; both are political assets of a free nation and a free people. Be it the governing party or the opposition, their respective roles are inherently bestowed by the people with an opportunity as well as a responsibility.

In my opinion, the ultimate challenge of this past election lay not as much in garnering a mandate as in the post-election hurdle of how to scale the wall of antagonism, and, in finding ways to reconcile the deep divide caused by distrust. We must not allow the narrow margin of victory to become a source of greater conflict in society. Thus, I hereby pledge to listen, to understand, to abide by laws and reasoning, and to strive to unify the people of Taiwan--so as to dissipate the animosity engendered by the campaign and rebuild a "bridge of trust" between the governing and opposition parties.

Unite Taiwan, stabilize cross-strait relations, seek social harmony, and reinvigorate the economy. These are the earnest hopes of the people and the preeminent mission of my new administration. But none of these objectives can be accomplished through an individual effort, nor can one political party do it alone. I shall go to the people with my plea for support, just as I stand here today, calling on the opposition parties and the voices of public opinion to join me in this historic endeavor.

BELIEVE IN TAIWAN--We must continue to foster national competitiveness and cultivate an atmosphere of humanitarianism, environmental protection, and sustainable development. **PERSIST WITH REFORM**--We shall forge ahead in response to the people's demand for reform in our political and judicial system, in the educational system, and in our financial and fiscal infrastructures; for improvement in the quality of our media; and, for comprehensive social reform. We shall be empowered by our faith in Taiwan; and we shall persevere in striving to achieve our goals. The efforts put forth today will translate into an enduring legacy for the future generations: a just new Taiwan where social justice, economic justice, fairness in our judicial system, gender justice, and international justice are realized.

In our face-off with increasingly fierce and vigorous competition on the international front, coalescing the power of the people and working expeditiously to enhance the efficiency of government mechanisms--these are tasks vital to Taiwan's sustained development. Yet, we must bear in mind that historic and political circumstances confine us to an existing constitutional framework that now poses the most direct impediment to effective governance.

The Constitution stands as the supreme legal basis of a nation, symbolizing a paramount contract between the government and the people. Our current Constitution was promulgated under circumstances that were very different from the society we know today, and the majority of the articles in the Constitution no longer address the present--much less the future--needs of Taiwan. The promotion of constitutional re-engineering and the re-establishment of the constitutional order are tasks that correspond with the expectations of the people and are in accordance with the consensus shared by all political parties.

The constitutional re-engineering project aims to enhance good governance and increase administrative efficiency, to ensure a solid foundation for democratic rule of law, and to foster long-term stability and prosperity of the nation. There are many problems in our current Constitution that need to be tackled, amongst which the more immediate and obvious include: whether to have a three-branch or five-branch separation of power; whether to adopt a presidential or parliamentary system of government; whether the president should be elected by a relative majority or an absolute majority; reform of the national legislature and relevant articles; the role of the National Assembly and its retainment versus abolishment; whether to suspend or abolish the provincial government; lowering of voting age; modification of compulsory military service requirements; protection of basic human rights and the rights of the disadvantaged; and, principles governing the running of the national economy. Indeed, this will be a project of grand scale that is certain to have significant impact.

To avoid repeating the same mistakes by past administrations--six rounds of constitutional amendments in ten years time--the proposed constitutional reform project must not be monopolized by one person or by a single political party, nor should it be undertaken merely for the short-term. In the future, we will invite members of the ruling party and the opposition parties, as well as legal experts, academic scholars and representatives from all fields and spanning all social classes, to collaborate in forming a "Constitutional Reform Committee." Our aim will be to generate the highest level of social consensus on the scope and procedure of the constitutional reform, all of which are to be open to public scrutiny.

By the time I complete my presidency in 2008, I hope to hand to the people of Taiwan and to our country a new version of our Constitution--one that is timely, relevant and viable--this is my historic responsibility and my commitment to the people. In the same context, I am fully aware that consensus has yet to be reached on issues related to national sovereignty, territory and the subject of unification/independence; therefore, let me explicitly propose that these particular issues be excluded from the present constitutional re-engineering project. Procedurally, we shall follow the rules set out in the existing Constitution and its amendments. Accordingly, after the passage by the national legislature, members of the first and also the last Ad Hoc National Assembly will be elected and charged with the task of adopting the constitutional reform proposal as passed by the legislature, abolishing the National Assembly, and incorporating into the Constitution the people's right to referendum on constitutional revision. By so doing, we hope to lay a solid foundation for the long-term development of our constitutional democracy, and the people's right to referendum on legislative proposals for constitutional revision.

During the last four years, we have witnessed dramatic political and economic changes in the world. Taiwan, in the face of a new international order, must stand firm yet persevere in our ongoing quest to become a better and stronger nation. We must also endeavor to re-position ourselves in equilibrium between global competition and international cooperation.

Taiwan's long-term friendship with the United States, Japan and our allies in the world has been founded on the safeguarding of our common interests. More importantly, it is an alliance of core values that we share: freedom, democracy, human rights and peace.

Taiwan's democratic development, and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, remains a focal point of international attention. On behalf of our government and people, I would like to once again express our heartfelt gratitude for the friendship that has been extended to us--reminding me of the old adage "together though apart." The people of Taiwan embrace peace. Needless to say, Taiwan's national security is of greater concern to us than to anyone else in the world. Faced

with an ever-increasing military threat from across the Strait, it is imperative for all the people, including political adversaries, to forge a strong will to defend ourselves, proactively strengthening our defense equipment and upgrading our self-defense capabilities. It is our sincere hope that our friends in the international arena will continue to render their valuable attention and assistance to the cause of peace in the Taiwan Strait and stability in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Taiwan stands ready to continue in its role as active participant and contributor to international society--this is the right of Taiwan's 23 million people; likewise, it is our duty as citizens of the world community. In the global campaign against terrorism, Taiwan has never been absent. In international humanitarian assistance efforts, Taiwan has always been there. Other recent accomplishments include the founding of the Pacific Democratic Alliance and the establishment of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. We can show a vigorous record of participation in international non-governmental organizations (NGO's), in addition to our collaboration with other members of the global village in advocacy and defense of the universal values of freedom, democracy and human rights.

At present, Taiwan is the world's fifteenth largest trading nation, with high rankings in international competitiveness. Yet, it took twelve years of strenuous effort for Taiwan to become the 144th member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). We are still fighting relentlessly to join the World Health Organization (WHO). Last year's outbreak of the SARS epidemic has taught the world a hard lesson, that we are all equals in sickness and disease. Nevertheless, despite the WHO's creed that health care--encompassing medicine, public health and disease control--is a basic human right and should heed no borders, Taiwan remains unjustly locked out.

Not long ago, the European Union (EU) welcomed the accession of ten new member states. Following several decades of effort, with respect to each individual country and by the free choice of citizens, the EU has successfully integrated the common interests of the people of Europe. Such a valuable experience has far-reaching implications and will impact world order in this new century. From this we see that regional integration is not merely an ongoing but also a future trend. This trend, in addition to globalization, has led to fundamental changes in the conventional thinking of national sovereignty and territorial boundaries, such that envisioning "universal harmony" will no longer be an intangible ideal.

With the new century upon us, let the leaders on both sides of the Strait, in striving to attain the greatest welfare for their peoples, heed this new trend by adopting a brand new frame of mind--together, let us take a fresh, unparalleled approach in addressing future cross-strait issues.

The peoples on both sides share a common ancestral, cultural and historical heritage. In the past century, both have endured the repression of foreign powers and the domination of authoritarian rule. Both our peoples now share an indomitable resolve to stand up and be the masters of their own destiny, a sentiment that is worthy of our full, mutual understanding.

We can understand why the government on the other side of the Strait, in light of historical complexities and ethnic sentiments, cannot relinquish the insistence on the "One China Principle." By the same token, the Beijing authorities must understand the deep conviction held by the people of Taiwan to strive for democracy, to love peace, to pursue their dreams free from threat, and, to embrace progress. But if the other side is unable to comprehend that this honest and simple wish represents the aspiration of Taiwan's 23 million people, if it continues to threaten Taiwan with military force, if it persists in isolating Taiwan diplomatically, if it keeps up irrational efforts to blockade Taiwan's rightful participation in the international arena, this will

only serve to drive the hearts of the Taiwanese people further away and widen the divide in the Strait.

The Republic of China now exists in Taiwan, Penghu (The Pescadores), Kinmen and Matsu. This is a fact. Taiwan's existence as a member of international society is also a fact. Such realities cannot be negated by anyone for any reason--for therein lies the collective will of the people of Taiwan. A half century of toil and labor by the people of this land has culminated in what is now known as the "Taiwan Experience," the fruits of which validate the existence of the Republic of China and, what is more, have become the proud assets, not only of the peoples on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, but of all Chinese societies.

History has given rise to the development of two very different political systems as well as two dissimilar ways of life on either side of the Taiwan Strait. However, if we make a concerted effort to find some positive aspect of our differences and commonalities, perhaps we shall discover a wonderful opportunity, a catalyst for building a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship. Taiwan is a completely free and democratic society. Neither single individual nor political party can make the ultimate choice for the people. If both sides are willing, on the basis of goodwill, to create an environment engendered upon "peaceful development and freedom of choice," then in the future, the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China--or Taiwan and China--can seek to establish relations in any form whatsoever. We would not exclude any possibility, so long as there is the consent of the 23 million people of Taiwan.

For more than a decade, interaction between the peoples on both sides has grown closer and more intense. This development bears great significance and increases the importance of furthering cross-strait relations. In the future, we hope to continue pushing forth current liberalization measures while expanding cross-strait exchange across the spectrum--from journalism and information to education and culture, to economics and trade--and to promote the establishment of channels for resuming cross-strait dialogue and communication. By building bridges, we will aim to close gaps and establish a foundation for mutual trust.

The first two decades of this century will be a crucial time for Taiwan to pursue a comprehensive program of upgrading and transformation; it also represents an opportune moment in history for Mainland China to move forward with democratization and liberalization. Therefore, governments on both sides should seize this timely opportunity to take on the challenges of global competition, advocating for progress and development instead of dwelling on the impasse of political debate. We have taken note that Chinese Communist Party leaders repeatedly emphasize the importance of steady development for the welfare of Mainland China's 1.3 billion people, hence, the espousal of "peaceful emergence" as its tone for developing international relations. We have no doubt the Beijing authorities recognize that maintaining the peaceful status quo in the Taiwan Strait is of vital importance to sustainable development for our respective sides and for the stability of the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.

It is my belief that both sides must demonstrate a dedicated commitment to national development, and through consultation, establish a dynamic "peace and stability framework" for interactions; that we must work together to guarantee there will be no unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait; and, additionally, we must further promote cultural, economic and trade exchanges--including the three links--for only in so doing can we ensure the welfare of our peoples while fulfilling the expectations of the international community.

As the President of the Republic of China, I have been mandated by the people of Taiwan to defend the sovereignty, security and dignity of this nation, to chart our country's sustainable development, to safeguard peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, to seek consensus and garner the collective support of all the people, and to carefully manage future relations across the Strait. Today I would like to reaffirm the promises and principles set forth in my inaugural speech in 2000. Those commitments have been honored--they have not changed over the past four years, nor will they change in the next four years. Upon this foundation, my next step will be to invite both the governing and opposition parties, in conjunction with representatives from various walks of the society, to participate in the establishment of a "Committee for Cross-Strait Peace and Development," combining the collective insight and wisdom of all parties and our citizenry, to draft the "Guidelines for Cross-Strait Peace and Development." The goal will be to pave the way for formulating a new relationship of cross-strait peace, stability and sustainable development.

Honorable guests and fellow citizens, if we look at a map of the world, Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu may seem like a tiny cluster of islands in the margins of the Pacific Rim. However, if you take a closer look, what you will discover are orchestral mountain ranges, painted with singing rivers, adorning some of the world's most bountiful ecological landscapes. Amidst the lush forestry and abundant wildlife, there is a human chain linking together 23 million warm smiles descended from an ethnic rainbow, with a history that spans across centuries and reflects a myriad of cultural heritage juxtaposed with political evolution and economic transformation--enough to fill an encyclopedia. Taiwan is a tolerant, oceanic country, a small but proud island connected to all corners of the world. Galvanizing these attributes will empower us to expand our visions and unleash our minds far beyond the horizon.

The story of Taiwan touches people's hearts. But, what inspires awe, more than its natural beauty, is the coloring that reflects the triumphant experience of overcoming hardship, trials and tribulations. This is the "Spirit of Taiwan," a gift passed through the generations, a glow which emits from the faces of the Taiwan people.

Now, the torch of history has once again been passed into my hand; each of you also holds the torch in your hands. I have set a goal for myself, that, during the next four years, I will continue to uphold the principles of sincerity and honesty, compassion and benevolence, unselfishness and impartiality in leading our country down the "middle road." I ask my fellow compatriots to stand by me in this endeavor. I will be counting on your support and encouragement.

I am just an ordinary man. I have always believed that there is no such thing as a great president, for only a great people can create a great country. Fueled by the power of the people, let us work together. Together, let us lay the foundation for our long-term national development--for sustainable democracy, sustainable reforms, sustainable humanities, and sustainable peace. Let Taiwan, the Republic of China, work toward solidarity and harmony, fairness and justice, prosperity and equality. History has endowed upon me this responsibility. It is a mission entrusted to me by the people.

On February 28 of this year, more than one million people stood on the land of Formosa, irrespective of ethnic affiliation, age, or gender. Hand in hand, they formed a mesmerizing "wall of democracy" some five hundred kilometers long, spanning the full length of the island and completing a breathtaking portrait of Taiwan. The time has come for Taiwan to stand tall, to reach out with courage and conviction. Let us mark a sustainable and firm place in the world.

My fellow citizens, let us be thankful for this land and let us pay tribute to the greatness of the people. We must unite for the sake of Taiwan. Together, we must defend our Taiwan, as we stride proudly forward into the twenty-first century. Once again let us hand-in-hand author the next chapter in this most inspirational story of twenty-first-century Taiwan.

Finally, let us wish the Republic of China great prosperity. And to all my fellow citizens, dear friends and honorable guests, may health and happiness be with you always.

Thank you.