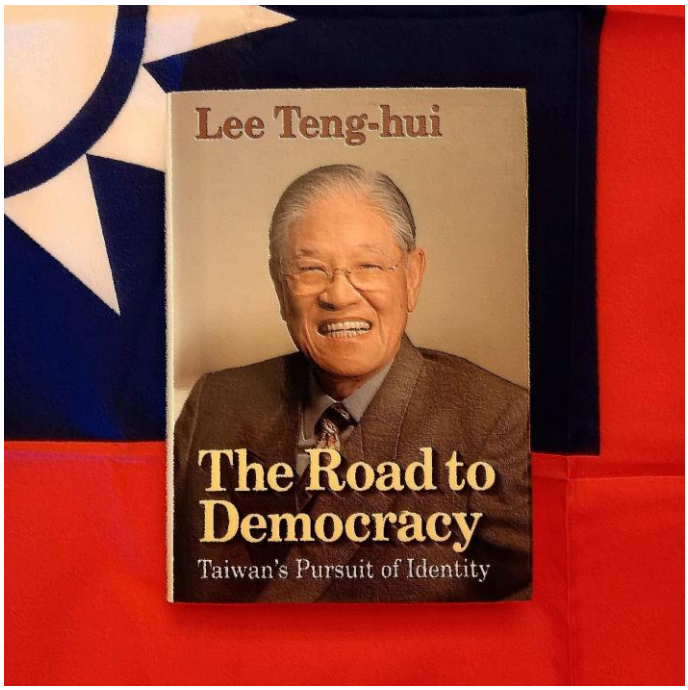
Why Taiwan owes Lee Teng-hui

Looking back from the present it's often easy to forget what conditions were like in the past and to judge the past with the points of view and values from the present.

When Lee Teng-hui **李登輝** (1923-2020) took over as ROC president in January 1988 following the death of his predecessor, the liberalization process in Taiwan had only just begun. Martial law had been lifted on Taiwan proper no more than half a year previously, and it was by no means clear which path Taiwan would eventually take. It should not be forgotten that democratization then was not a forgone conclusion, and there was no guarantee that Lee Teng-hui would be successful in the end. At the time, many of the players who had run the KMT's one-party-state and military dictatorship with iron fist were still strong and influential.



What makes Lee Teng-hui's contributions so exceptional and valuable is that he proceeded carefully enough, not too fast, so that the heavyweights in the ruling party and armed forces tolerated the new course and even supported it—albeit in many cases grudgingly—to a degree that was sufficient for Lee. No serious attempt was made to topple Lee and return to the harsh authoritarian rule which had characterized the ROC for decades, and that is probably Lee's most remarkable political achievement. President Lee prevailed in his power struggle against the military and used the opportunity offered by the two-thirds majority which the party led by him possessed in the National Assembly to push through decisive changes of the ROC Constitution. As a result, Lee Teng-hui's smart and carefully measured pace transformed Taiwan into a real democracy, and when Lee left office in 2000, political power was transferred to the opposition for the first time in the history of the ROC.

Lee Teng-hui was the right person at the right moment, and because he did the right thing Taiwan today is the beacon of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and rule of law its inhabitants are rightfully proud of.

Thank you, Lee Teng-hui.

[By Tilman Aretz—Aug. 17, 2020]