



# Tokyo can learn from Taipei's virus tactics

Abe should have followed Tsai's response model and recruited experts instead of career politicians



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**O**n April 7, the Japanese government declared a state of emergency to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, but many people, including the governors of Tokyo and Osaka, thought this decision came too late. Reportedly, the reason for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's delay was opposition from influential corners of his cabinet because of the negative economic impact.

At the same time, several of the Abe government's much-publicized policy responses, such as distributing two cloth masks to each household and cash relief of 300,000 yen (\$2,800) to selected households, met with public criticism.

In contrast, way back in January, the Taiwanese government under President Tsai Ing-wen began limiting the entry of visitors who had been to infected areas; developed a 24-hour testing kit; centralized mask production; and utilized information technology and data to facilitate mask distribution. These measures were well-received by the public.

Why have these two governments handled the pandemic so differently despite their similar levels of socioeconomic development?

A large part of the answer is how their primary task forces, ad hoc governmental committees to address the pandemic, are organized. Japan's Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters, convened by Abe in late January, is composed of members of his cabinet, all of whom come from the ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito.

Its members' average age is 62 and most are men. According to the minutes of the task force, while the body has met every two to three days since its launch, each meeting has lasted only 15 minutes on average.

Since all of the members are career politicians, it does not come as a surprise that policy reactions proposed by the Response Headquarters appear to be swayed more heavily by political concerns than public health priorities.

The equivalent body in Taiwan stands out as nonpartisan and merit-based. The task force, the Central Epidemic Command Center, is headed by



Military personnel spray disinfectant during a drill in New Taipei City on March 14.



Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung, who, as a dentist, is a medical professional. He conducts daily press meetings with detailed information for almost an hour, unlike Abe's sporadic and brief media appearances.

Digital Minister Audrey Tang, a renowned computer programmer, has played a central role in creating online platforms to inform people about the locations of mask supplies and disease prevention measures. Abe's technology policy minister, Naokazu Takemoto, who is 79, in contrast to the 39-year-old Tang, does not have any significant background in the digital world.

In short, while Abe does also receive advice from a panel of experts, Japan's primary task force is made up of insiders, members of the ruling coalition who have entrenched electoral interests. The parallel group in Taiwan comprises mainly outsiders who can leverage their expertise to counter the crisis.

Why this difference? We can find one answer in the structures of Japan's parliamentary government versus Taiwan's (semi-)presidentialism.

In general, chief executives in parliamentary systems are accountable to the legislature, making it necessary for prime ministers to forge and maintain a closer relationship with the ruling bloc than presidents in their systems. Presidents are chosen directly by the entire electorate and thus are not accountable to the legislative majority.

Additionally, the Japanese version of the

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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, second from right, declares a state of emergency at the Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters in Tokyo on April 7.

parliamentary system heavily relies on career bureaucrats. The staff of the prime minister's office has fewer than 20 political appointees, with the vast majority of the rest career bureaucrats seconded from various ministries. This low number is a reflection of the tradition of highly valuing career civil servants while placing little value on incorporating private-sector talent into the government.

Taiwan has a tradition of bringing in academics and private-sector experts to high-ranking government posts, up to the level of cabinet ministers. Typically, Taiwanese cabinet ministers hold doctoral degrees, and many have no background in elected office.

Consequently, Taiwan's system gives the chief executive institutional leeway for appointing outsiders who have both expertise and political autonomy, a point more conspicuous in times of crisis.

Put differently, when organizing a task force of experts, Tsai is structurally not at the mercy of the political equilibrium within the ruling coalition, while Abe is.

Although the Taiwan model has its limitations, one of the lessons that the Japanese government can learn is the importance of creating a balance between political leadership and expertise within the parliamentary structure of government. The coronavirus crisis is showing that Japan has not yet found the right balance. **N**