

# Taiwan's former presidential candidate Ko Wen-je charged with bribery

Shih-Yu Chou  
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On December 26, 2024, Ko Wen-je, the founder and then chair of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), was charged with accepting bribes (15 million new Taiwan dollars, or roughly half a million US dollars).

This was in return for a real estate deal Ko approved as mayor of Taipei, profiteering and embezzling political donations to the party. He was detained and kept incommunicado on August 31, 2024, following a police raid on his residence the day before.

Ko was mayor of Taipei between 2014 and 2022 and finished third in the Republic of China's (hereinafter Taiwan) 2024 presidential election.

Prosecutors are seeking a sentence of 28 years and six months in jail for the defendant. Ko and the TPP have claimed that the charges are a political vendetta. While the 610,000-word indictment did expose Ko's complicated political-business nexus and profit-making corporation, it has yet to establish meaningful monetary inflows and outflows that he and the real estate magnate were accused of making during his tenure as mayor.

Ko is the second major politician to face anti-graft investigations and charges since President Lai Ching-te took power in May 2024. Both have shown an interest in competing for president in 2028, and they were and continue to be Lai's political opponents.

In the run-up to the 2024 presidential race, Ko alienated the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its supporters when the TPP and the Kuomintang (KMT) saw a joint ticket as their best chance of winning.

Ko, lagging his KMT counterpart by at least six percentage points in the polls, would only accept a joint ticket if the KMT candidate acted as his running mate. This proposal not only sparked acrimonious disputes between the two parties of the opposition but also exposed the supposed "reformist" and "anti-establishment" posturing of the TPP.

The DPP further branded Ko Wen-je as Beijing's "favorite presidential candidate" when he stated in December 2023 at a presidential debate that "the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family" and that he would engage in dialogue with China.

In January 2024, Lai Ching-te, the ruling DPP's presidential nominee, was elected president in a single round via first-past-the-post voting. He received only 40.05 percent of the popular votes on a turnout of 71.86 percent, compared to 59.95 percent for his two opponents (KMT and TPP candidates, 33.49 percent and 26.46 percent).

In the concurrent parliamentary election, the DPP lost its majority and gained 51 of the 113 seats; the KMT, 52; and the TPP, 8. Since then, the DPP minority leader in the parliament has repeatedly rallied tens of thousands of supporters to surround the chamber while accusing KMT and TPP MPs of being Beijing's operatives, dark and evil forces, traitors and saboteurs.

A few DPP supporters have issued explicit fascist death threats to particular MPs from the two opposition parties.

In December 2024, the ruling DPP endorsed South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law in a social media post.

As the DPP-aligned media run daily defamatory allegations of misconducts against him, the indictment would suffice to tarnish Ko Wen-je's brand and the TPP based on a single maverick leader and to make an increase in defence spending and further provocations against China easier.

Throughout his political career, Ko has maintained political flexibility in relation to competing factions of the Taiwanese bourgeoisie, siding with one over the other whenever it suits him.

When working as a surgeon at National Taiwan University Hospital in the early 1990s and in the 2000s, Ko organized political committees representing physicians for DPP mayoral and then presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian.

Despite controversies involving prominent DPP politicians, Ko remained politically connected to the DPP until he launched his own party in 2019. For example, in November 2007, Taiwan's then-President (May 2000-May 2008) Chen Shui-bian threatened to declare martial law to crush the opposition KMT. In 2009, facing corruption charges, the former head of state asserted that the US, as "the occupying power of Taiwan", must exercise its jurisdiction over the island by hearing his cases in US military courts rather than ROC ones.

None of this stopped Ko forming an informal alliance with the DPP, which would provide him with the political support he needed to run for office.

When Ko was elected mayor of Taipei as an "independent" candidate in 2014, he gained strong support from the DPP, which did not field a mayoral candidate in the city. The office is viewed as a stepping stone to the presidency.

Ko, like other representatives of the Taiwanese bourgeoisie, has an affinity for imperialism and colonialism while rejecting genuine democracy. In an interview with *Foreign Policy Magazine* in 2015, he claimed, "the longer the colonization, the more advanced

a place is.” Despite mainland China having a bigger GDP than Vietnam, Vietnamese culture remained “superior” to that of the Chinese.

In the same interview, Ko hailed the United States as “a cultivated nation” that Taiwan should emulate because the US allowed “citizens to live like human beings” and “care[d] for the underprivileged.”

Working people in the United States who have experienced poverty and social distress would be surprised by Ko’s willful ignorance. According to the Wealth Inequality Database, the top 10 percent of Americans owned 72.6 percent of the country’s wealth in 2015. In comparison, the bottom 50 percent held 1.1 percent. The supposedly “uncultivated” China has a wealth distribution similar to that of the most “caring” capitalist country. In 2015, the top 10 percent of Chinese amassed 67.3 percent of the country’s wealth, while the bottom half possessed only 6.5 percent.

Asked about his take on Taiwan’s democracy by *Foreign Policy*, Ko Wen-je responded, “Does Taiwan have democracy?” He argued that true democracy meant that politics belonged to the people; Taiwanese politics was dominated by corporations and political parties.

This did not suggest that Ko intended to get big money out of politics or to launch a frontal assault on two bourgeois parties, however. He, instead, proposed “redefining politics” by “finding one’s conscience” and “doing the right thing.” His philosophy was, “Be good at heart, and do your best” which can “help Taiwan become a better place.” During the presidential campaign, he went even further, comparing the TPP to the Society of Jesus religious order.

To put it another way, the Taiwanese ruling class could be compelled to implement social reform if “progressives” under his political and spiritual leadership appealed to the moral sentiments and emotions of the bourgeoisie.

In 2017, Ko stressed Taiwan’s “democracy, freedom, pluralism and openness” as a model for Asian countries to emulate while slamming Hong Kong for lacking “the soul of freedom and free elections” and Singapore for being “a canary in a birdcage.”

This exemplified the petty-bourgeoisie’s naive reformist illusion about bourgeois democracy and the refusal of this particular social layer to acknowledge capitalism’s decay and disintegration in front of our eyes.

Throughout his eight-year mayoral tenure, as well as the presidential campaign, Ko’s reformist rhetoric and moralistic approach to politics drew a passionate following among youth and a sizable portion of the middle class, who saw the TPP as a genuine alternative to the two-party duopoly.

Ko and the TPP speak for a privileged segment of the middle class. They can present themselves as “progressives” and a “check and balance” against Taiwan’s ruling elite by aligning themselves with one or another bourgeois faction. Such political convenience speaks to their role as a lightning rod, channeling popular anger and social discontent back into the establishment parties of the ruling class.

Ko cannot fathom why the DPP has rapidly shifted to authoritarian methods of rule, or why his electoral challenge to

rival sections of the Taiwanese ruling elite posed no threat whatsoever to the social and economic system with which imperialist and Taiwanese bourgeois interests are inextricably linked. Similarly, he could not explain why he might wind up as “a canary in a birdcage” in this supposed land of “democracy, freedom, pluralism and openness” for a few years, if not 28.

In a pamphlet titled “Their Morals and Ours”, Leon Trotsky stated before the outbreak of the World War Two that war would begin with a series of “convulsions, crises, catastrophes, epidemics, and bestiality”, referring to imperialism as the final stage of capitalist world domination and its relationship to the crisis in democratic morality. As the economic life of humanity reached an impasse, class antagonism would then intensify.

Trotsky elaborated:

The safety valves of democracy began to explode one after the other. The elementary moral precepts seemed even more fragile than the democratic institutions and reformist illusions. [...] The decay of capitalism denotes the decay of contemporary society with its right and its morals.

The “synthesis” of imperialist turpitude is fascism directly begotten of the bankruptcy of bourgeois democracy before the problems of the imperialist epoch.

... the most limited petty bourgeois moralists still live even today in the idealized memories of yesterday and hope for its return. They do not understand that morality is a function of the class struggle; that democratic morality corresponds to the epoch of liberal and progressive capitalism; that the sharpening of the class struggle in passing through its latest phase definitively and irrevocably destroyed this morality; that in its place came the morality of fascism on one side, on the other the morality of proletarian revolution.



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