

Foil to Ma: The Unexpected Role of Taiwan's James Soong

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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James Soong continues to play cat and mouse games in Taiwan politics. Aside from a potential motive of self aggrandizement, observers ponder what thoughts, game plans and strategies are running through his mind nowadays. He already has the required signatures needed to declare himself as a presidential candidate, but he has forestalled an official declaration until the end of October. At that time, he hopes he will have one million signatures. Is he fishing? One million signatures could make him secure in the hope to get with certainty at least 5 per cent of the vote. That would allow his People's First Party (PFP) the right to appoint legislators at large. Then, he adds the declaration that he may or may not attend the Double Ten celebrations, particularly if there is the danger that it be thought that he had made peace with Taiwan's current president, Ma Ying-jeou. Ironically however, despite these antics, Soong has already provided Taiwanese voters with a valuable service. Valuable, how so? Yes, Soong and his past record intentionally or unintentionally serve as the perfect foil with which to measure and expose the unfortunate shallowness and ineptitude of President Ma.

What makes Soong such a perfect foil? For starters, there is little distracting ideological difference between Soong and Ma as regards China and cross-strait issues. Any criticism leveled by Soong in such matters cannot be easily dismissed as would be expected criticisms from the opposition pan-green camp. Soong and the PFP are clearly blue. He and his party had joined forces with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) on numerous occasions in the past, most notably of course in 2004 when he ran as Vice-President on Lien Chan's ticket. Then the PFP's legislative candidates ran in joint sponsorship with the KMT, a joint sponsorship that dearly cost them legislator at large positions. No, any criticism by Soong would have to be focused on ability and performance, making Soong and his record the perfect foil to expose Ma's incompetence.

Take example number one. Soong has, albeit humorously, been able to point out that Ma is like a Persian cat, decorative and pleasant to look at, but not much good for anything else. If a pan-green official would have made such a remark, it would be expected and laughed off, but Soong? That is different and more telling. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that Ma could not say the same in reverse about Soong. If Ma were to accuse Soong of being a Persian cat, none would accept it.

Then there is performance and Ma's ineptitude. Soong's past achievements and accomplishments as Provincial Governor and in other roles stand in sharp contrast to Ma. Ma for all of the advantages he started out with in 2008 has substantially little to show for his four years as president. If Soong had been president in 2008 with full command over seventy-five per cent of the seats in the Legislative Yuan, Taiwanese would have expected much more to have been accomplished. Taiwan would not be in the sad shape that it is in now.

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Ma's poor performance leads to further questions, "How would James Soong have done it? How would he have handled problems such as the economy?" Certainly he would not have made a foolhardy 6-3-3 promise. In four years he would have had much more to show for his time. Then go further, "How would Soong deal with China?" Would Soong not be more hard-nosed? Would Taiwanese not expect to have been in a better bargaining position under Soong? In matters of state would not James Soong have chosen a better cabinet and appointed better people? Soong would not have selected neophytes as Ma did; and even if one grants that Ma's team may be well-intentioned; the fact is that they would not carry or live up to the expectations of quality that one would have expected of people under Soong.

Finally there is the matter of image. Ma's poor performance exposes the reality that Ma constantly depends on image to over shadow his lack of performance. Ma is overly reliant on King Pu-tsung, his spin-doctor to make him look good. James Soong like Lee Teng-hui and others in the past is one who has created his own image; people of such caliber do not need a public relations front man like King, but Ma does.

Yes regardless of what games he is playing. James Soong has already done Taiwan a service. He presents the perfect foil to expose Ma Ying-jeou and make Taiwanese realize that they cannot afford another four stagnant years under Ma. In his own ironic way and as no one else can, James Soong, a pan-blue politician, serves this role. He echoes what Lee Teng-hui has already expressed. It is time for Taiwanese to "dump Ma to save Taiwan."

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