

Taiwan: No Honeymoon For Ma Ying-jeou this time

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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The dust of the January 2012 elections has barely settled and Taiwan's president Ma Ying-jeou has already found himself in trouble. The nagging issue of US beef is back on the burner. When the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) Chairman Raymond Burghardt spoke in Taiwan in 2011, he pooh-pooed the idea that the beef issue was a major problem between the USA and the Ma administration's failure to deliver on its promises. After all he explained, the amount of money involved was negligible in view of the total amount of money involved in all the transactions between the two countries. Further the USA would certainly be happy with Ma's re-election. Other pundits tried to join the chorus. But if it was all so negligible, why then right after the election, is Burghardt all of a sudden back on Ma's doorstep saying it is time to settle our bill?

Early in Ma's first term as president, it seems he told the USA that he could be the good little boy they wanted in Taiwan. He would not mention that dreaded word, "independence;" he would promote business with China and not rock the money-for-all boat by insisting on Taiwan's dignity or sovereignty; in effect, in exchange for their support, he would be as compliant as they wished. Thus when the US support for his administration was offered, he forthwith promised that it would be no problem to get US beef accepted in Taiwan. The US believed him. But then it hit the news in Taiwan and the US found that while Ma wanted to please everyone, he was not that capable to deliver on his promises.

Problems immediately arose in Taiwan over the questionable tainted condition of some US beef and good boy Ma quickly found himself in a different type of stew. The people at home were not that eager or ready to accept tainted beef and rather than risk a threat to his re-election, Ma was forced to renege on his promise to the US beef industry. He did so at least temporarily to save his image and his chances for re-election at home.

Now Ma has been re-elected, that goal has been achieved. As a result, the people and countries to whom he had made promises for their support of his image are starting to line up and say that nothing is free; it is time to pay the piper.

Burghardt is the first to show up. It is his 12th visit to Taiwan since his appointment as AIT chairman (2006); that makes an average of two a year, interesting for a country that supposedly has no problems with Ma. This time, he has barely waited for the Lunar New Year holidays to end.

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To be sure, Burghardt is not coming empty-handed or without some carrots or bargaining chips to present to Ma. If Ma wants future arms agreements as regards F-16C/Ds or submarines, then he better get on board. If Ma wants Taiwan to proceed with Trade and Investment Framework (TIFA) talks with the USA, then he better reconsider his broken promise on US beef. If Ma wants the US help in Taiwan's joining a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), again he better get on board.

All of the above are things that Ma would need to bolster his promises to improve Taiwan's flagging economy, something that he failed to deliver on during his first term. No one needs to hear the infamous 6-3-3 promise again do they? So it is crunch time for Ma. There won't be any honeymoon period for him during his second term in office. Burghardt is the first of many "collectors" lining up to say it is time to claim a piper's due. "We supported your image because you served our purpose in your first term. Now it is time to deliver."

Some 51.6 per cent of Taiwan's voters elected Ma this time, a lot less than in 2008. He did not do much with full support at that time, will he be up to the game under more adverse conditions? Ma waffled on the beef issue with the US the first time round because he realized it would tarnish his leadership image at home. This time, will he waffle on the Taiwanese people in protecting them from tainted US beef? Taiwanese won't be the only ones that are watching how Ma responds. Beijing also has its list of expectancies as well. And though the People's Republic of China (PRC) leadership will be changing in 2013, their desire for Taiwan has not diminished in the least. Be alert Taiwan, you may soon wonder why you voted as you did.

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