

Taiwan can't afford Ma's inaction

Written by Jerome Keating
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As Taiwan's Jan. 14 presidential election approaches, one idea is becoming clearer and clearer: Taiwan cannot afford to waste another four years under Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) as president. Despite measured hopes and claims, predictions on Taiwan's GDP growth continue to fall; they have now dipped into the 3 percent bracket. This indicates that the so-called "Golden Decade" that Ma has adopted as his campaign slogan has already died, in the same way that his "6-3-3" promise, of 6 percent annual growth, annual per capita income of US\$30,000 and an unemployment rate below 3 percent, never got off the blocks.

People First Party (PFP) Chairman James Soong's (宋楚瑜) description of Ma as a Persian cat (pretty to look at but inept at catching mice or doing anything else) is looking more and more on the mark. Ma has lived too long off King Pu-tsung's (蔣經國) hype and surface imagery while forgoing substance and results; he remains in effect the inveterate poseur par excellence.

In Ma's eight years as mayor of Taipei, he posed for plenty of photos and Taipei saw some cosmetic changes, but nothing substantive. Traffic flow did not improve, housing prices spiraled and the city barely kept its budget — and then only because Ma welched on the city's national healthcare premiums and passed them on to the central government.

As president, Ma began with great promise. He had veto-resistant control over 76 percent of the Legislative Yuan. Even a mediocre president could have done wonders with such an advantage. But what has Taiwan to show? Never has so little been done by one with so many advantages. Typhoon Morakot revealed there was no plan — posing couldn't stand in its way. And now, as the wealth gap widens, housing prices are more prohibitive and graduating university students earn less than their counterparts four years ago. Some try to counter by saying that there are more flights to China — but that program was initiated under the past Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) president. What about the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA)? It was rammed through without legislative scrutiny, yet still did not salvage Ma's 6-3-3 promise. Thus far the ECFA has only benefited a few of the rich; substantive progress is lacking; a smattering of protective trade agreements have been signed and few of those are advantageous to Taiwan.

What are the prospects for the future? The 2012 Legislative Yuan will be totally different, a multiparty body no longer dominated by the KMT. If Ma was ineffectual in the green wood, imagine how useless he will be in the dry. Taiwan and the legislature will need real, Taiwan-centric leadership; Taiwan cannot afford to waste another four years under a China-dependent Ma.

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One of the reasons for this failure is that Ma lives in the past, in another world, trying to preserve the still-born, half-successful, unfulfilled 1911 Republic of China (ROC) revolution. It is a world that never got off the blocks in China and never will, but Ma persists on clinging to that illusion. Chiang Kai-shek (蔣經國), on the run, dragged that ROC illusion to Taiwan and used it to justify the White Terror and the subjugation of the Taiwanese by his one-party state. Chiang insisted on perpetuating the unrealistic myth that under him, the ROC could return, retake and rescue China. Ma has followed that dream. Rather than face the reality of a brave new democratic world and all of its numerous developments, Ma perpetuates the myth of the return of that same ROC, believing that with it he could one day rule China.

The Taiwanese do not want that. True, they are willing to trade with China, as any other nation is, but they have no desire for union with China and all of its problems. Despite this, a remnant in the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) also cling to Ma's illusion. For them to do otherwise would be to admit that the Taiwanese (taibazi in their ROC eyes) are capable of ruling themselves outside of that myth.

The UN rejected that ROC vision of the world in 1971, and Taiwan will never gain admission to the UN under this name. Ma does seem to recognize the futility of this and he no longer applies for membership as the ROC, but he is still too afraid to apply for UN membership as Taiwan. The US rejected the same concept of the ROC in 1979. It tolerates Ma's clinging to his myth because, as a good little boy, Ma will not rock their boat. As regards Taiwan (not the ROC), the US' official position is "undecided and undetermined" — that clashes with Ma's myth, but he pretends the US still believes in the ROC. The People's Republic of China (PRC) tolerates Ma also because he, with his ROC myth, will not violate the PRC's belief in "one China." The PRC knows the Persian Cat is ineffectual, so it only has to wait until the Taiwan apple falls into its hands. The illusion of "peace in the Taiwan Strait" exists because the US and the PRC, for separate reasons, tolerate "good boy Ma" who, though ineffectual, at least does not rock their boats.

Hoping that people would forget his unfulfilled campaign promises and, in an effort to perpetuate the ROC myth, Ma's government blew this year's national arts budget (US\$7.1 million) on a two-night musical performance, Dreamers. However, people have not forgotten Ma's many empty pledges. In 2005, as KMT chairman, Ma promised to divest the party of its ill-gotten gains. That has yet to happen. The profit from the few things sold was simply put back in the KMT war chest and it remains one of the richest parties in the world. Ma also promised in 2005 to protect Taiwan through increased arms procurement, only to block such a move until he could take credit for it after his party returned to power. Finally, last year, Taiwan got simple "upgrades" on old equipment. As the catalog of broken promises continues to expand, Taiwan

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must realize it cannot afford to waste four more years on Ma.

Is there any hope for a new strategic economic revival? That was abandoned when Ma dropped the seemingly savvy Vincent Siew (馬英九) as his candidate for vice president and replaced him with the lackluster but loyal foot soldier Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登毅). With few accomplishments to show for the past four years, Ma's final strategy appears to give up on the development and presentation of new policies. Instead he will circle the wagons and rely on smear tactics to vilify his opposition. In such a campaign, loyal soldiers unashamed to promote such stories are his best and only help.

Former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) said it well enough some time ago: "Dump Ma to save Taiwan." Finally more and more Taiwanese are beginning to realize the full meaning of what he said. Time is running out. If Taiwan is to move forward, it cannot afford to waste another four years under Ma.

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