

The Ma mandate that never was

Written by Jerome Keating
Friday, 20 January 2012 09:50

Most are familiar with the adage “businessmen have no country,” so it came as no surprise that immediately after President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) victory (51.6 percent of the vote) in Saturday’s presidential elections, numerous pro-China business pundits cheered. One after another they declared that Ma’s win was a clear mandate for his cross-strait policies.

Let everyone go full steam ahead in investing and deepening business ties with China; profit allegedly awaits all. Some even suggested establishing political ties with China as well, as a means to cement these alleged profit gains. Was this really what Taiwan’s vote signified? Not by a long shot. Instead of being a mandate, the vote was a call for caution; the populace at best decided to leave things in a holding pattern. The devil is in the details.

First, let us put this in a deeper perspective. In 2008, Ma claimed that he was elected because of his platform for stronger cross-strait relations with China. He got 58.4 percent of the vote and that could be classified as a mandate. But here comes the first misread: Ma, despite his post-election claims, was elected primarily because of his “6-3-3” campaign pledge. If pundits question what “6-3-3” means, or its role, they have not been following Taiwan for the past four years. Ma’s promise of 6 percent annual GDP growth, an unemployment rate of below 3 percent and an annual per capita income of US\$30,000 never got off the ground. Ma later said this promise would be fulfilled by 2016 and not by 2012, but those who were alert would have noticed that Ma ever-so-slyly avoided mentioning it again in his 2012 campaign.

Now come the more obvious questions. If Ma had a mandate of 58.4 percent in 2008, and his vote dropped to 51.6 percent (almost 7 percentage points), on what grounds can he claim winning another mandate? Ma lost more than 1.5 million votes from 2008 to 2012. In 2008, Ma won by 2,213,485 votes; this year, he won by a greatly diminished 797,561 votes. Is this what mandates are made of? Is going downhill a mandate?

Look likewise at the Legislative Yuan. In 2008, Ma’s party, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), won 81 of the 113 seats in the Legislative Yuan. This year, Ma’s party won 64 seats; it lost 17 seats. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won 27 seats in 2008; this year it won 40, a gain of 13 seats.

The Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) running simply on the pledge to oppose two of Ma’s policies — the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) and increased cross-strait

The Ma mandate that never was

Written by Jerome Keating
Friday, 20 January 2012 09:50

relations that endanger Taiwan's sovereignty — had no seats in 2008; this year it got three seats. The People First Party (PFP), normally an ally of the KMT, purposely ran separately from the KMT this time and went from one seat to three seats. Do all of these losses for Ma's party constitute this alleged new mandate?

Ma did have a victory. He won the election, but in no way can that be considered a mandate. Ma could claim a mandate in 2008, but if his policies were even halfway decent his vote count would have stayed even or even possibly increased. It did not. The KMT had controlled 70 percent of the seats in the legislature — that gave it the power to implement any and all of Ma's policies.

This year, the KMT has a greatly diminished majority in the legislature; it has lost its power to push through legislation unopposed. The opposition gained the advantage of being able not only to present changes to the Constitution, but also to put forth recommendations to censure and recall the president. Is this a mandate for Ma and his party or a new mandate for the opposition to be a better watchdog and monitor the president and his policies?

The pro-business cheerleaders with no country of their own of course cheer on. Invest, invest and invest. One can wonder, who pays the cheerleaders and what do they hope to gain? That may not be important. What is more important for Taiwan watchers is to look at the details. There is no mandate; this year's vote was more a decision to wait and see, to go into a holding pattern.

The DPP has not only been strengthened, it is back in the game. Other changes are coming as well. The US will have its own election in November and China's President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) will soon step down. Taiwan has decided to wait and see.

Jerome Keating is a commentator based in Taipei.

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2012/01/20](#)