

Tsai not learning from mistakes

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“I am the one who needs to change the most,” President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) wrote on Facebook on Nov. 25, one day after she stepped down as Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chairperson following the party’s electoral losses. Regrettably, the events of the past three weeks suggest that more thorough introspection is needed by Tsai, who apparently has yet to grasp why voters turned their backs on the DPP on Nov. 24.

Case in point one: Tsai has launched so-called “hallway chats,” addressing the media in a hallway of the Presidential Office Building — an idea clearly inspired by US president Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” and styled after the press talks US presidents give in the corridors of the White House.

The move ostensibly aims to paint Tsai as approachable and willing to answer questions from the media. Sadly, the execution was preposterous. In her first “hallway chat” on Dec. 6, Tsai ended up saying that there was no such thing as a “power shift” within the DPP, oblivious to the fact that it was extremely inappropriate to address party matters in the presidential office in her role as head of the state.

At the second “chat” on Monday last week, she addressed controversy over a Cabinet plan to require that motorcycles manufactured from Jan. 1 feature anti-lock braking or combined braking systems, and on Taiwanese baker Wu Pao-chun’s (吳寶春) public endorsement of the so-called “1992 consensus,” turning her prestigious office into that of a mere “weekly commentator on current events.”

Tsai’s performance in the “chats” left many wondering whether the president had no more pressing obligations than addressing issues that could easily be handled by the premier. Tsai appears to mistakenly believe that more “face time” with the public will help address its grievances. However, with less than two years left in office, the public no longer cares what Tsai has to say — it wants to see actions.

Case in point two: On Thursday last week, Tsai met with Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲). Accompanied only by Minister Without Portfolio Chang Ching-sen (張景森), she attended a presentation about the municipality’s urban renewal plans and development projects. By doing so, Tsai went against the system of government, under which regional affairs are within the executive powers of the premier, not the president.

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Amid speculation that Ko might run for president in 2020, media described the meeting as an attempt to “appease” Ko and keep him from running, after the DPP fiercely criticized the mayor in the run-up to the elections. Rather than presenting a positive image, Tsai hurt her own image, suggesting to the public that she only has power politics on her mind, even going as far as encroaching on the premier’s remit.

Case in point three: Tsai appointed her cousin, former minister of labor Lin Mei-chu (林美珠), as chairwoman of the state-run Taiwan Asset Management Co even though she had no experience in asset management, causing a public outcry that forced Lin to resign one day after assuming the position.

One reason many dislike the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) is its history of handing out government positions as rewards for services rendered. The episode with Lin gave rise to public doubt over the Tsai administration’s judgement, as it appears to have made political appointments that reek of nepotism, cronyism and patronage.

Tsai would be well-advised to recalibrate her inner compass by revisiting the DPP’s history. Perhaps that could keep her from losing sight of the party’s foundations.

An unchanged DPP administration under Tsai’s unchanged leadership might only end up reinforcing public perception that a DPP government is no different from a KMT government.

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