

President Ma Ying-jeou and other leaders of his rightist Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) administration seem to believe that the plunge in his approval ratings to 20 percent and the sweep of three legislative by-elections on Jan. 10 by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are due to a failure to please fundamental KMT supporters.

Based on this "re-examination," the KMT has decided to "act like a ruling party" with "complete governance" and has reverted to the style of rule it adopted during its period of authoritarian rule or "one party dominance."

This hard line turn was displayed last week by the KMT's ramming through the legislature of undemocratic revisions to the Local Government Act, an orchestrated impeachment of Control Yuan impeachment of controversial chief public prosecutor Chen Tsung-ming and "requests" for policy changes telephoned directly to Cabinet ministers by KMT Secretary-General King Pu-tsung.

Blind to decades of resentment among the Taiwan people over decades of such behavior by KMT technocrats in the authoritarian period, Ma and King may be paving the way for even worse approval ratings and election results.

However, instead of opening their ears to divergent voices, the KMT leadership seems intent on reviving the martial law era custom of requiring the news media "report only the good news and censor the bad news" and on re-establishing control over state-owned, public and privately-owned news media.

The party owns the news

The latter possibility was revived by the unfortunate decision by the National Communications Commission Jan. 20 to evade the a legal ban in the Broadcasting Act and permit government, political party and military agencies to "indirectly" purchase as much as 10 percent of the shares in television or radio broadcast media in an action that reverses the clock on hard-own democratic media reforms.

KMT turns back clock on Taiwan media reform

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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Younger readers may not realize that the KMT had monopolized the television and radio media through the 1990s thanks to its control over the Taiwan Television Corp (TTV) through the Taiwan Provincial Government, its direct ownership and operation of the China Television Corp (CTV) and domination of the China Television Service (CTS) through the Ministry of defense and, until 2004, dominated the radio waves through its party - owned Broadcasting Corporation of China (BCC).

Ending the KMT's grip on the news media was one of the key demands of the Taiwan democratic movement for which Taiwan citizens and journalists risked their lives or prison terms.

Among the achievements of the media reform movement were the legalization of the previously underground Formosa Television and the founding of an independent public television network in 1997 and legislative passage of revisions to the Broadcasting Law in December 2003 that banned government, party and military media ownership and the realization of the ban in December 2005.

After Ma "won back Taiwan" for the KMT in May 2008, the ruling party has moved to reassert control over the state - owned but formerly editorially autonomous Central News Agency and Radio Taiwan International and is now embroiled in a naked drive to grasp control over the public Taiwan Broadcasting Service, which includes CTS.

The NCC's decision ostensibly aims to open the doors to the Taiwan Mobile with Kbro Co, a cable and digital television provider and the acquisition by Delta Electronics of ELTA Television, transactions which have been stymied by the 15 percent share held in the both telecom firms by the Fubon Financial Holding Company, in which the KMT controlled Taipei City government and four state-run pension funds have major stakes.

But the NCC decision also throws open the doors for the cash - rich ruling KMT to invest and re-establish "influence" over formerly party - owned media such as CTV or BCC and to buy sizable stakes in privately-owned news media that can be used as platforms to stifle remaining independent broadcast media.

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Any illusions that the KMT will be shy about taking full advantage of this opportunity should be dispelled by both its previous record, its determined drive to take over TBS and a high profile campaign of denunciation of news media criticism of major government policies.

The spectre of revived KMT "complete governance" over Taiwan's news media has sparked a fury of protests against the NCC's action by the opposition DPP, news media watchdog and professional journalist organizations and the public.

A debate and poll on the online "NewTalk" forum (<http://newtalk.tw>) showed that 62 percent of participants opposed the NCC's "liberalization" and backed the view of Satellite and Television Broadcasting Association spokeswoman Chen Yi-mei that the best way to protect Taiwan's democratic culture and ensure vibrant development of commercial media is to keep "party, government and military" investment out of the media.

We urge the public to realize that a Taiwan without media autonomy will be unable to prevent either the rollback of democracy by the KMT or the creeping cultural and media domination by lavishly financed state owned media from the authoritarian People's Republic of China and to signal their disapproval by voting against KMT candidates in the upcoming Feb. 27 legislative by-elections.

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