

The 'one-term' specter over Ma and Obama

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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In the wake of electoral setbacks suffered by United States President Barack Obama's Democratic Party, the Taiwan news media could not refrain from comparing the situation of the U.S. president with his counterpart, President Ma Ying-jeou of the rightist Chinese National Party (Kuomintang).

After all, Ma's ruling KMT has similarly suffered a series of defeats at the polls, beginning with a stunning victory by the opposition Democratic Progressive Party in a legislative by-election in Yunlin County in September, followed by the loss of benchmark Yilan County and a poorer-than-expected vote tally in the Dec. 5 "three-in-one" local polls and a DPP sweep of three legislative by-elections Jan. 9.

Obama, who won election in November 2008 with a robust 53 percent mandate, has seen his approval rate dip below 50 percent due to a worsening unemployment rate and controversy over his proposed health care agenda.

Ma's popularity plunge has been far more precipitous as his approval ratings had dived to the mid-20 percentile by late 2009 after winning the presidency in March 2008 with a 58 percent mandate and fell to a mere 20 percent after Ma ordered the KMT to use its nearly three-quarters majority to ram bitterly controversial changes to the Local Government Law through the Legislative Yuan and improperly interfered in the jurisdictions of both Control Yuan and the judiciary.

Obama and Ma share some similarities, even though the U.S. president is ideologically from the "center-left" while Ma's KMT is unmistakably a rightist party.

After all, both have law degrees, won their campaigns in the name of "change" and began governance with solid parliamentary majorities and high expectations from voters who believed they could clean up the messes left by their predecessors and, especially, rejuvenate their respective economies.

Regretfully, both similarly began to commit serious errors after enjoying brief honeymoons.

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Dialogue and self-examination

However, a fundamental difference between Obama and Ma lies in their divergent attitudes toward facing mistakes and managing crises.

Before delivering his first State of the Union address to Congress last Wednesday, Obama apologized to the nation for failing to live up to expectations and declared in a news interview that he "would rather be great one-term president than an ordinary two-term president."

In contrast, Ma has attributed his party's electoral defeats on a supposed delay of the Control Yuan's impeachment of Public Prosecutor General Chen Tsung-ming for an allegedly improper relationship with former DPP president Chen Shui-bian.

In the face of Republican criticisms of his health care agenda, Obama tried hard to communicate with the public to explain his policy and strive to win greater popular backing.

In contrast, the Ma government has kept decision-making in a secretive "black box," including on controversial policies such as fully reopening Taiwan's market to U.S. beef imports, the nationwide immunizations for A(H1N1) influenza and the "cross-strait economic cooperation agreement" with the authoritarian People's Republic of China, only to face sharp backlashes from the opposition and public when the shortcomings and risks of these decisions were exposed.

Instead of changing their secretive decision-making patterns, Ma and other KMT leaders have confessed only to not sufficiently delivering top-down "guidance" to the people or complained about the lack of "scientific" awareness among our citizens.

Obama inherited tremendous burdens from his Republican predecessor, including two unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the most devastating global financial crisis since the 1930s, and admitted in his acceptance speech that years might be needed to clean up

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these messes.

On the contrary, wilfully blind to visible signals of a global financial crisis, Ma promised a return to high economic growth rates and, when Taiwan experienced its worst economic nightmare, put the blame on the global economic climate.

Ma similarly tried to avoid responsibility for the KMT government's tardy response to the flood disaster caused by Typhoon Morakot last August, an error which triggered the steady erosion of his popularity.

Obama appealed to his opponents to understand the reasons for his health care agenda and displayed his concern for the unemployed to regain the trust of middle-of-the-road voters in his State of the Union address

In contrast, in the wake of the KMT's "Black Saturday" on January 9, Ma visited a family of hard-core KMT supporters and declared his intent to ram contested bills through the Legislature "like a real ruling party."

The president and KMT chairman evidently believes that his party must drum up enthusiasm among "dark blue" supporters to cast ballots to avoid another "Black Saturday" on Feb. 27, a short-term electoral concern that more characteristic of crass politicians instead of statesmen.

It could be that the only solution to Ma's dilemmas is a pledge to only serve as an "one-term president" to get the country back on the right track. But such a proposal would beg the questions of whether Ma has the personal courage of an Obama to make such a vow and the political vision to know which is the "right track" for Taiwan's future.

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