

Ma Ying-jeou's Cabinet Reshuffle: Ah-Q's Last Stand?

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
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Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou has barely begun his second term as president; yet already he seems to be circling the wagons in a hopeful last-ditch defensive effort to fulfill a final fantasy. It is true that there have been warning signs and indications that popular confidence in him achieving anything was on the wane. His re-election figures certainly told part of the story. In 2008, his margin of victory was by 2,213,485 votes; in 2012 after four years of lackluster performance his 2 million plus victory margin votes had dropped to 797,561 votes (327,973 if one would add James Soong's votes to the opposition). Following that his post election approval ratings have continued to sink down to the embarrassing range of 15 per cent and lower. All these should be signs that he needs to switch gears and work together with the opposition and not isolate himself. Instead he has chosen the opposite path and resorted to new, desperate and unusual measures in his cabinet reshuffle.

The issue of course is not that Ma needed to reshuffle his cabinet; that could be expected. But rather it is the areas that he chose for the reshuffle and the people he chose in the reshuffling process. This is what causes consternation and worry. In Ah-Q fashion, Ma has put on hold previous economic dreams and promises for Taiwan and replaced them with newer and greater dreams and fantasies, to wit, resolving the age old Taiwan/China cross strait divide and conundrum.

King Pu-tsung, the former Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) secretary-general and the man who both created Ma's image and basically ran his major election campaigns has been rewarded with the crucial position of the nation's chief representative to the United States (US), Taiwan's closest ally. Jason Yuan, whom King is replacing as chief representative to the US has been brought back to the unlikely position of National Security Council secretary-general.

In the delicate area of cross-strait relations, the inexperienced Lin Join-sane, past KMT Secretary-General replaces long term Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) Chairman Chiang Pin-kung. And National Security Council adviser Wang Yu-chi, another trusted Ma aide, is being moved up to take over as Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) chairman, an area where he also has little experience. So what is happening? Why are all these changes in a new arena instead of the needed area of improving the nation's economy?

Yes, the economy? What ever has happened to concern over Taiwan's failing economy and Ma's infamous 6-3-3 promises? Those undelivered economic promises and not cross-strait relations had been the main reason for Ma being elected in 2008. Ironically all that is now being put on hold in this re-shuffling. The challenges of how to jump-start the economy, how to solve

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the growing unemployment rate and how to stop the decreasing value of income all remain. But yet, Premier Sean Chen, the Ma yes-man responsible for that economy, remains in position. He recently survived a no-confidence vote in the Legislative Yuan, only because of KMT majority party vote.

So as the nation finds Ma circling the wagons and switching priorities to cross-strait relations with his cabinet reshuffling, the obvious questions follow. Exactly what criteria were used in choosing personnel for such a crucial switch?

Unfortunately the foremost and primary reason given for the selection of candidates has not been one of competence and/or expertise. Instead, the unsettling basis for selection has been that of loyalty and membership in Ma's inner circle. As trusted Ma people, it is touted that these men would thus best be able to "precisely" deliver Ma's message. Such reasoning begs the question, for the harsh reality of world politics is this, that if Ma's message and policies are pipe dreams, hopes and fantasies, then no matter who the messengers are, or how close they are to Ma or how well they convey the message, the end result of the conveyed message and policies will still be pipe dreams, hopes and fantasies. Does Ma still believe that by simply willing something to happen, he can achieve it? Has Ma resorted to believing his campaign hype and PR image?

Ma has never been known to be a man of accomplishments. Ma's history and record as Mayor of Taipei and in his first term as president remains one of image, one of style over substance and one where unfulfilled promises are replaced by new ones. This is what worries people most about Ma's new cabinet changes and shift of direction. If improving the economy in four years has proven too daunting for Ma, his switch to solving and dispensing the cross-strait conundrum in three years and with the help of inexperienced people is not going to bring progress. Yet Ma in Ah-Q fashion has sailed in convinced that this new area is the one where he will finally make his mark. Ma's dream and confidence are not shared even by many of his pan-blue cohorts; most vocal has been Wang Chien-shien President of the Control Yuan who has made no bones about branding Ma's record as totally "incompetent;" Ma has certainly not fared any better in the pan-green camp.

One cannot but also wonder whether leaders in the US and China, two major players with major stakes in these cross-strait issues, are inwardly chuckling, or embarrassed or aghast at Ma's appointments. On the US side, its leaders have parlayed and worked with their "undecided" perspective on Taiwan since World War II; how could they possibly feel that Ma's new talentless tack will suddenly resolve all? And as for China, how will that nation, which has made no secret of its hegemonic ambitions to pull Taiwan into its sphere, react? How will it

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view Ma's Ah-Q dreams? And finally of course there are the people of Taiwan. While China and the US, may feel that Ma's inexperienced appointees gives them more leeway to decide matters between themselves, what about the Taiwanese? Certainly the democratic people of Taiwan will not want to continue to be left in the cold and dependent on Ma's yes men.

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