

## Ma can idle away next two years

Written by Liberty Times Editorial  
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Tuesday was the sixth anniversary of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) inauguration. A lot of people in the nation will be well aware of the impact this president has had on Taiwan over the past six years.

His personality flaws and lack of leadership ability have seriously impeded the government's ability to govern, to the detriment of the nation's social progress and development.

Ma still has two years of his final term to go, but a rather strange psychological phenomenon has emerged: Many people are of the opinion that he should not really do anything meaningful in the remainder of his time in office. These voices far outnumber those who think he should attempt to do something substantial with the remainder of his time.

Taxpayers shell out generously for the monthly salaries of elected heads of government and even for their pensions after they have left office, but many would be fine with Ma idling his time away when he goes to work every day.

That way, he would avoid messing things up any more than he has already.

From this perspective, it does not matter how much it costs the taxpayer. How did it come to this, with these problems surrounding Ma and his inner sanctum of cronies?

It is important that the public understands the root cause of this mess, so that we can draw conclusions from it and learn our lessons from it. Otherwise the electorate will just make the same mistakes again, at great cost to the nation.

In terms of policy and governance, the first thing to ascertain is what kind of person Ma is. At heart, Ma is an elitist with some democratic beliefs, who occasionally drops the ideals of democracy to reveal himself as a straight-up elitist.

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Political elitism is anti-democratic, or is at least distrustful of democracy and subscribers to this model believe that having an elite political class responsible for governing a country is the natural order of things.

An elite ruling class with highly developed organizational skills monopolizing political power and invested with the legitimacy to oversee the affairs of the masses was a situation first described by the Italian political theorist Gaetano Mosca.

Moreover, as Austrian-American economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter observed, even if elections are the means by which political power is obtained, the political elite still tends to view democracy as a political model and elections simply as a method of legitimizing their political power.

Ma has resisted debating the referendum threshold on the grounds of strong voter turnout in presidential and legislative elections over the past decade.

He has even said that direct democracy, including recourse to initiatives — such as petitions — and referendums, are all exceptions, with representative politics being the norm.

Voter turnout for presidential elections and referendum thresholds are two different things, but Ma has repeatedly said that his early opposition to direct democracy and preference for delegative elections are born of the same rationale.

The problem is not just about believing himself to be part of an elite and the sense of hubris that entails. Ever since he assumed political office, Ma has favored employing close and trusted associates as part of his policymaking inner circle, forming a clearly structured hierarchy.

Thus he allows people into his immediate circle based upon how close he is to them, creating a concentric command structure with himself in the center, populating progressively larger outer circles with others, depending on his relationship and history with them.

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It is a them-and-us style of organization, the exclusive versus the excluded, with decisions being made by a restricted inner circle behind closed doors.

Compounded with Ma's elitist sense of entitlement, this gives rise to the phenomenon of "groupthink" in the way he leads the government and governs the nation.

The term groupthink refers to the situation when constituent members of a small group, in the interests of maintaining unity and harmonious consensus within the group, are incapable of effectively evaluating any alternative approaches.

Studies by US research psychologist Irving Janis on collective decisionmaking are very interesting — and particularly pertinent — when applied to how Ma and his inner sanctum expect people to perform as yes-men.

So-called group unity subjugates all, maintaining an agreed, unquestioned stance that is further consolidated by the binding effect of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) prodigious party assets. This type of group is structurally flawed. The leader gives orders, there is no decisionmaking procedure in place and the make-up of the group is highly homogenous.

A collective which has fallen into groupthink tends to believe in its own infallibility and the excessive complacency and blind optimism that this engenders often makes the group ignore potential pitfalls or warning signs.

In addition, the members of the collective are generally convinced that their decisions are just and ethically and morally sound.

A case in point is Ma's inner circle's mantra of "we are not selling Taiwan out, we are selling Taiwan's fruit." Even CommonWealth Magazine wrote that it must have been heartbreaking for Taiwanese fruit farmers to see container loads of oranges being dumped into the sea and that the contract for milkfish from Greater Tainan was political in nature.

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Another symptom of groupthink is collective rationalization — such as the insistence that the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement had to be signed if Taiwan is not to become marginalized — and the suspicion with which any suggestions from those outside the inner circle are met.

Under Ma, the government often complains that others oppose their plans simply for the sake of it. Former minister of the interior Lee Hong-yuan (李鴻元) had it right when he said, after leaving his position, that there had been no communication over the cross-strait service trade pact and that the public hearings had been purely for show.

Also, because the inner sanctum is so cut off from the outside world, very little information gets in or out. As a result, alternative ideas are thin on the ground and when an idea has been settled upon, it is rarely changed or improved.

The most evident example of this was the government's failure to come up with an actual policy on industry, apart from daily announcements of its intention to sign free-trade agreements with a host of countries.

Another case in point was its utter failure to produce an alternative energy policy, despite announcing that work on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City's Gongliao District (公寮) was to stop.

So, what has the government achieved over the past six years? On the occasion of the sixth anniversary of Ma's presidency, we can see that the campaign promises made back then were either merely sound bites or that the government has done the exact opposite of what it said it would do.

Seeing Ma during the KMT conference heap encouragement on Premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜樺) once again goes to show that this president — with his personality flaws and his lack of leadership skills — and the disastrous administration that he leads, seem to have a very high opinion of themselves.

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No wonder so many people are begging them to stop now.

Translated by Paul Cooper

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