

## Time running out for Ma spin team

Written by Jerome Keating

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The flap over the Republic of China (ROC) flag-raising ceremony at the Twin Oaks Estate in Washington on Jan. 1 should have played out like *Much Ado About Nothing*. It should have been quickly handled and written off as a simple misunderstanding, a mere glitch in the ongoing relationship between Taiwan and the US.

That it took legs and escalated far beyond its merit into a week full of news replete with “he said, they said” accusations, denials and the inevitable posturing required by all sides, including China, indicates that it was symptomatic of the far deeper problems now facing President Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) administration.

On the one hand this administration finds itself caught between trying to maintain the traditional spin it has lived by for so many years, while on the other hand it must also begin to build Ma’s defense to avoid jail at the end of his term.

As Ma enters his last full year as lame duck president, his team is falling into desperation mode. It is caught between these two contrasting demands with their own two conflicting strategies.

First, Ma’s team is under siege and must circle the wagons against the numerous, ever-increasing attacks on his behavior.

Second, it also feels the need and desire to establish a breakthrough, a standout point to justify or at least salvage the years of lackluster incompetence held together only by spin.

The mounting attacks are more problematic than a simple reflection on poor performance. Most pressing at present is Ma’s alleged “men shen (門神)” guardian angel relationship with the Wei (魏) family and the food-safety-scandal-ridden Ting Hsin International Group (鼎新國際). Millions of New Taiwan dollars have allegedly been funneled into Ma’s campaign coffers and custody, and not accounted for. Radio personality Clara Chou (周子瑜), who made the Ting Hsin accusation against Ma, has not been cowed by threats of lawsuits.

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Not only is this a case of where there is smoke, there is fire, but it appears that there might be more fires than first thought. So numerous are the threats to Ma's administration that even pan-blue camp talk show commentators are suggesting that the president should head for the US before his presidential immunity from conviction disappears at the end of his term.

Then there is the issue of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) assets, something Ma promised he address in 2005 when he took over as KMT chairman. Nothing has been done and no amount of spin can cover that. Not only has nothing been done, but some of the assets even seem to have mysteriously disappeared, though into whose bank accounts is yet to be determined.

Evidence and threats of indictments are also mounting on numerous other fronts, such as illegal wiretaps sanctioned in the September strife involving Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平). As a result of all this, those who have witnessed the double standards of vendetta justice inflicted on former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) are beginning to look for payback as Ma's last year of immunity approaches. Jail time looms as no idle threat.

The KMT's trouncing in the Nov. 29 nine-in-one elections last year adds to this. The party, which forced the president to relinquish his leadership, must now place its own survival over the needs of Ma.

New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu (Eric Chu), at present the sole candidate for the KMT chairmanship election, looks likely to be named the new party leader, but whatever happens it will not be done out of consideration for Ma.

At a time when he needs support in preparing his defense, the KMT has more pressing issues at hand in facing the possibility of losing the presidency and seats in the Legislative Yuan next year. The party does not have time to worry about Ma.

Throughout Ma's presidency, his team has consistently relied on spin. Supposedly, Taiwan should be entering its "golden decade." Relations between the US and China, which have continuously been touted as the best ever, are not quite where they claim to be. All of that spin is starting to unravel. Ma's spin doctors are desperately searching for something to deflect the truth that little has been accomplished in his seven lackluster years as president.

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The flag-raising ceremony indicates clutching at straws. Touted initially as another “Ma breakthrough,” within the course of one week, it ran the gamut from being a patriotic demonstration to a warning, to a denunciation from the US and finally the threat that Ma’s appointee in Washington might best be sent packing if it happens again. All this over what could have been much ado about nothing, except that these are desperate times for the Ma team and they needed something positive to spin.

National Security Council Secretary-General King Pu-tung (金溥聰) has been remarkably quiet on this front. Normally Ma’s spin master, King has been low-key of late, raising questions that even he might be concentrating more on his own future in a collapsing house of cards.

The business community, which for some time believed the spin that only Ma could save relations with China, began to realize before Nov. 29 last year that despite Ma’s claims, business relationships with China would not be that different regardless of which party was in power. The US and China also sense that they also can be done with Ma, as he and his spin have run their course.

What is left for the Ma administration? A new spin is now ironically being floated: Ma has all along wished to be a peacemaker, even between the nation’s two political camps. As one spin unravels, another begins, but will it be timely enough to save Ma from jail in about a year? Do not bet on it.

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