

Ma's failure to accept democracy

Written by Jerome Keating

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As Taiwanese voters gear up for the Jan. 16 presidential and legislative elections, a stark irony has become apparent. Not only has President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) popularity continued to hover at extremely low levels of between 9 and 19 percent for the past year, but he has also been described by the international media as a “yesterday man,” even before he has completed his second term as president.

This might seem a strange fate for a man who, when he was first elected president in 2008, was acclaimed as the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT)'s “golden boy” and a leader who would usher in an era of good fortune for the party.

Ma received 58.45 percent of the popular vote in the election — a higher proportion than former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) ever won and the best result of any presidential candidate in a multi-party election in Taiwan. What has happened to Ma in the past eight years?

Ma's fall from grace has a variety of causes, but the crux and irony is that it is primarily a result of the growing vitality of Taiwan's robust democracy.

In what way? To begin with, along with democracy came a free press — something that is a necessary ingredient of any democracy.

That freedom allowed the decisions and performance of elected officials to be scrutinized — making them accountable for their behavior. In a democracy politicians have to do more than talk the talk.

Ma's rise to prominence in the KMT began when the KMT ruled Taiwan as a one-party state — and being able to talk the talk was all that was needed. Pomp and even hypocritical cant were a natural part and parcel of rule. Unfortunately, Ma has remained entranced by that mentality.

In such a milieu, if a politician ascends to the top position in the nation, then they can automatically claim to have a Confucian-based “mandate of heaven.”

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Not so in a democracy, for democracies do not have the unchanging hierarchies inherent in Confucianism. In a democracy, the mandate is not from heaven, but from the electorate. If voters put an official in office, it follows that they can then hold them accountable.

This is a far cry from the days of former presidents Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國). In those times, the KMT controlled the media, and so the president could easily count on his actions being glorified by the media.

This is the first of Ma's problems — he never expected that he would be held accountable for what he promised in order to win votes.

Second, of course, as president, the whole nation measures and judges one's actions. Ma had been able to coast during his tenure as the mayor of pan-blue Taipei; in that position he did not have to live with the scrutiny that comes with the presidency. That is especially so in connection to Ma's infamous "6-3-3" campaign promise, that has dogged him over his two terms.

The "6-3-3" pledge refers to the goal of achieving annual GDP growth of 6 percent as well as annual per capita income of US\$30,000 and an unemployment rate of less than 3 percent.

A third factor in Ma's case is that in newly formed democracies voters have a natural learning curve. It takes some time for voters to become aware that it is they who put a person in office and therefore they can also vote out an incumbent. In such situations, voters must learn to sift through cant, spin, pledges, etc and judge by results. Taiwanese have proven very adept in this regard.

Surprisingly quiet during the election brouhaha in recent days has been Ma's erstwhile PR agent and spin doctor former National Security Council secretary-general King Pu-tsung (邱國治). "King the Knife," as he is sometimes called, has helped Ma lay out a glorified and embellished line of Ma's promises and alleged accomplishments.

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For this, he was rewarded with positions as vice mayor of Taipei and then secretary-general of the National Security Council. However, eventually voters began to realize that Ma was never able to live up to King's hype.

For some observers, Ma's fall from grace has remained a surprise, but for others who watched his lackluster performance as Taipei mayor it was only a matter of time. A telling factor is that in the 2012 presidential election Ma received 51.6 percent of the vote.

Some saw it as a second mandate, but those in the know quickly compared it to his previous percentage of 58.45 in 2008 and saw the writing on the wall. It was in November 2012 that Ma was given the epithet "bumbler," by the international media.

Democracy is about demonstrable results and meeting voters' expectations. Added to Ma's troubles is the need to meet the demands of younger people who are now old enough to vote. Many of this demographic only know a democratic Taiwan. They have not been subject to one-party state brainwashing or developed the "Stockholm syndrome" of some of the nation's older voters.

This is why Ma is not even an item of discussion now that January's elections are within sight and KMT candidates do not want to be seen with him on the campaign trail. He has become a yesterday man and it is democracy that has made him so.

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