

Tsai needs to exploit diplomatic window

Written by Keng Kim-yung 彭金榮

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President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration has often gone out of its way to suppress the national flag of the Republic of China (ROC) in international forums, and it does not object when retired generals visiting the other side of the Taiwan Strait sing the People's Republic of China's national anthem — the March of the Volunteers. Now that Ma's government is nearing its natural demise, it has suddenly transformed itself into a guardian of the ROC Constitution, mouthing slogans about “respecting the Cabinet system, as embodied in the Constitution” and “allowing the majority party in the legislature to form a Cabinet.”

By such means, Ma's government is trying to force the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its chairperson, president-elect Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), to take over the whole shambles earlier than it is supposed to.

Looking at the way former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) chairmen, including former presidents Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) and Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) as well as Ma, treated the Cabinet and legislature as rubber stamps and ordered them around, or, in their presidential roles, directly intervened to cut the legislative speaker down to size, the KMT has spent a lot of energy on slapping its own face.

It is hard to figure out what the party is really trying to do.

As president-elect, Tsai should not let herself get tangled up with Ma's caretaker government, which is having difficulty looking after its own affairs. Instead, she should take advantage of this opportunity to implement one of the proposals she put forward before the elections, namely her “go-south policy.”

Before assuming office on May 20, she should go and visit some ASEAN members, along with India, and meet their leaders to lay the groundwork for the foreign relations tasks that her government will tackle after she takes office.

At present, Tsai is still an ordinary citizen with no official status, so, however unreasonable the Chinese government may be, it would be hard for it to justify asking those countries not to let Tsai enter.

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Even if China objects, India, the dominant power in South Asia with a population of 1.2 billion; Indonesia, the largest and most powerful member of ASEAN; and Vietnam, which has the backing of the US and a tradition of resisting China, would not necessarily comply with Beijing's wishes.

That will no longer be the case after May 20. Once she takes office, it is unlikely that Tsai will have any more opportunities to visit major countries such as India, Vietnam and Indonesia, whose burgeoning populations add up to more than 1.6 billion.

If Taiwan promotes a new go-south policy unilaterally, without first engaging in talks and consultations with other heads of state, it would be hard to achieve any breakthroughs. Taiwan will then find itself in the regrettable situation of carrying on Ma's policy of a "diplomatic truce" with China.

Time is pressing. A window of opportunity of a little more than three months is rather short — not enough to deploy the new go-south policy in all its details. Tsai should not play along with fanciful notions about taking up the post of premier or calling for Ma to resign so that she can assume office sooner.

Rather than wasting time on a war of words with the caretaker government, Tsai would do better to quickly head outward and promote her team's foreign relations work, so that Taiwan, which has been in "diplomatic shock" for many years, can soon return to the international stage.

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Translated by Julian Clegg

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