

Presidents and the will of the people

Written by Jerome Keating
Monday, 29 August 2016 10:22

Call it fate, or call it chance, but it certainly has been fitting and appropriate that the evaluation period of the first 100 days of the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) would coincide with the recent visit of China's Shanghai Municipal Committee United Front Work Department Director Sha Hailin (沙海林) at the Taipei-Shanghai Forum.

This timely coincidence provides Taiwanese not only with a chance to reflect on Tsai's initial performance, but also on their identity and the growing differences between Taiwan's democracy and China's one-party state autocracy.

It also serves as a reminder as to why the public elected Tsai. In a democracy, elected leaders are expected to respect and answer to the will of the people; Tsai was chosen as the one most people expect could carry out the public will.

True to his position, Sha trotted out the traditional memes and canards of China.

He said that he has come to show that blood is thicker than water, though he ironically seemed ignorant of the fact that most Taiwanese have abundant indigenous blood in contrast with their Han neighbors.

He also repeated how the shaky fabrication of the so-called "1992 consensus" is to be relied on as the rock solid basis for future negotiations.

He even spoke nostalgically of how he wanted to revive and promote China's Zhonghua minzu (中华民族, "Chinese ethnic group") — Chinese nation — presumably at the expense of any Taiwanese minzu, leading one to question what dynasty or one-party state rule the nostalgia was for.

One cannot fault Sha in any of this; he did his job like any loyal puppet in a system that only rewards cooperative players. Certainly he knew the expectations; for if such players want to keep their job, they must not only toe the line, but also do it in a pleasing and not too capricious

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middle way. He would be well aware of how one must measure up to the expectations of the Politburo without overplaying one's hand. Even the loyal, but ambitious, Bo Xilai (薄熙来) did not get past such shoals.

On their side, Taiwanese are able to look at this differently and can parlay Sha's words against their own, separate history.

They have clearly known tyranny. They were part of the Japanese Empire for half a century, and in the latter half of last century they had to live under a Chinese one-party state with its White Terror era martial law and party-designated president.

However, it is seven decades since the end of the Japanese colonial era in Taiwan.

Taiwanese should look at the various presidents of that period and how they could be classified.

One way, of course, is to separate those who have been directly elected by the public — those who ruled from 1996 on — from those of the earlier period during in the one-party state system.

A different and more telling way is to evaluate Taiwan's presidents on how they perceive the nation and its role in the world.

This division is more complicated. Do they see the nation as Taiwan, or as a part of China?

How does this distinction relate to the sense of identity that is growing in Taiwanese society?

In recent decades, as Taiwanese enjoy the fruits of their democracy, they have also sloughed off previous one-party state propaganda and brainwashing.

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They have grown and that has triggered an identity paradigm shift and a shift in how they view the world.

One could ask, which came first? Did democracy fuel their sense of identity or did their sense of identity fuel their desire for democracy?

Whatever the answer, the emergence of the will of the people and its role has become evident.

Returning to the question of how the nation's presidents have perceived Taiwan, it is likely that those in the one-party state days like Chiang Kai-shek (蔣經國) and Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) always saw it as a part of China.

Former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝), on the other hand, marks a transition.

He spanned the one-party state era and the rise of democracy. As part of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) establishment, he became president, first by succession since he was vice president when Chiang Ching-kuo died in 1988, and later as KMT party representative in 1990.

Yet in 1996, he became the first president to be directly elected by the people.

Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) who followed Lee, clearly saw Taiwan as separate from China.

With Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), the pendulum swung back the other way. Ma always talked about Zhonghua minzu and his relationship to the Yellow Emperor Huangdi (黃帝). His policies were overcast with a shadow of a desire for "unification" and that eventually earned him dislike.

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Tsai was elected as a clear countermeasure to the past eight years of Ma.

The will of the people spoke again that they wanted someone who saw Taiwan as independent.

Though Lee had been president under the KMT banner, he was blamed for the party's loss in 2000 and was seen by some in the KMT as a traitor, but they were not listening to the public.

In 2000, Lien Chan (連戰), with only 23 percent of the vote, was not who the public wanted.

If Lien had dropped out, the public would have clearly chosen James Soong (宋楚瑜).

Lien tried again in 2004, this time bargaining with Soong to join him, but he lost again.

He has tried to blame the loss on the attempted shooting of Chen. However, 2000 combined votes, or 59.9 percent for Soong and Lien, would shrink to 49.89 percent in four years.

That was the will of the people and even enlisting more than 4.5 million voters who had supported Soong; Lien could not garner the majority needed.

Chen, throughout his eight years in office, fought a KMT dominated-legislature and paid a price.

He also earned the hatred of the pan-blue camp that could not admit that their loss was due to not listening to the will of the people.

Chen would later be jailed after a trial fraught with questionable double standards; for him justice is yet to be served.

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Ma, on the other hand, has so far escaped indictment, but for him justice might yet be served.

Perhaps the Mega International Commercial Bank money laundering questions linked to the KMT's "stolen" assets would be the tipping point that brings this about.

Regardless of the fate of each of these past presidents, the will of the people is growing stronger and it will outlast all of its past presidents.

Tsai, of course, as the first pan-green president with control of legislature, has the burden of responsibility to listen to the will of the people.

For Tsai, the public will continue to go their way with or without her, so she must listen.

With her "new southbound policy," her apology to Aborigines and her ability to avoid the entrapment of the "1992 consensus," her first 100 days show that she is still in tune with the will of the people.

And as for Sha and his words inviting Taiwanese to again submit to a one-party state autocracy, Taiwanese can only roll their eyes and smile.

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