

## Democracy, presidents and Taiwan

Written by Jerome Keating  
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Double Ten National Day has passed and for a second year President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) has conducted the National Day ceremonies with the necessary dignity and focus. Meanwhile, the day did not pass without a certain amount of expected commentary and criticism.

Among issues raised by members of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) were concerns such as how many times the name “Taiwan” was used in place of the “Republic of China” and how certain pronouncements seemed devoid of what might be considered disputed national symbols.

In line with the latter is the issue of whether the national flag should have been more prominent. Does the flag really represent Taiwan or does it represent leftover baggage from the past one-party state days of the KMT?

Others shared the opposite view and felt that because Tsai has been president for over a year now and her party has a majority in the Legislative Yuan, she should be advancing reforms much faster.

These issues represent the diversity of sides found in a democracy and will not be resolved in a day or a month, but perhaps by the next election.

In a one-party state, such as China, the will of the people is of little concern to its rulers. They do as they please and set course regardless of any opinions from the majority of those they allegedly serve.

However, in a democracy where the president is often elected by a majority of the voters, citizens can question the nature and style of leadership, especially if the margin of victory is not that large.

In such a situation, how much of a mandate can any president claim?

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To assess Tsai's leadership and mandate, questions need to be asked and comparisons need to be made.

In democracies, the president is the leader of all the people and must find a balance that enables leading the whole nation in a positive direction.

Elected officials must be conscious that many people voted for the opposition, while others did not even vote. Taiwan has been fortunate, as its voter turnout is typically about 70 percent as opposed to in the US where it hovers at about 50 percent.

Presidents should not be too quick to claim a mandate. In any election, the question arises: Just what are the people voting for or against?

Some voters feel that they are choosing the lesser of two evils. Others might claim that they are voting against rather than for someone. Similarly, there are also single-issue voters for whom one issue, like gay marriage or abortion, becomes a deciding point. All these factors must be weighed when the overall national policy is being determined.

Former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) recently chided Tsai, saying that she should not omit the so-called "1992 consensus."

However, Ma seems to have a short memory in this regard.

In 2008, if anyone could have claimed a mandate, it would have been Ma. He won by the largest percentage of any president in Taiwan since the first free election in 1996. In addition, his party, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), won a veto-overriding majority in the Legislative Yuan.

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Still, Ma misread what the voters were voting for or against and where any mandate lay. Some voters had been upset with the apparent corruption in the Democratic Progressive Party in the eight years of Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) presidency. Others might have been lured by Ma's famous "6-3-3" promise. Others might even have been charmed in the short term by his good looks.

Ma started in earnest to follow his perceived but misread mandate, namely to establish closer ties with the People's Republic of China. However, while the people wanted progress, they did not want to progress in that direction.

By 2012, Ma's support was already faltering, but he pressed on. He received the nickname "bumbler." His "6-3-3" promise never materialized, and the Sunflower movement of 2014 proved his death knell. His party lost heavily in the next two elections.

All this casts an ironic cloud on Ma's current urging of Tsai to return to the "1992 consensus," as if this were a magic mantra that could still lead Taiwan toward development, when he failed.

In reality, the fabricated "1992 consensus" has proven to be a hangman's noose around the neck of Taiwanese. The people have recognized that and yet Ma cannot read this reality.

Presidential misread or error has also been seen on the other side of the Pacific, in the election of US President Donald Trump. Although only in his first year, Trump's presidency is already becoming a "disaster," to use one of his favorite blame words.

Although Trump lost the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes, he was able to win the election because of the quirks of an outdated electoral system. However, in his narcissistic fashion he behaves and boasts as if he has been given a popular mandate.

Amid consistent gaffes, Trump's approval rating has remained low. He is the least popular of all recent US presidents, but he boasts of the great job he allegedly is doing. In his case, his rhetoric wears thin even among members of his own party. The play is only in its first act, but many are worried that it will be a tragedy for the US.

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Tsai does not fit either of the above examples. Her actions have been slow and steady; she has kept the nation on an even keel.

On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, the Chinese Communist Party is holding its 19th National Congress, and all are watching what direction President Xi Jinping (习近平) will take, as double-digit growth is past and corruption is evident.

China has lost any relevance to a socialist revolution. What mandate is left?

Whether Xi and the congress tackle China's real internal problems or whether they seek a distraction in Taiwan remains to be seen.

Tsai will have no control over Xi's actions. She should only be wary of them and protect her nation. Her role is to source the direction that Taiwanese want and develop the policies that can carry that direction out.

Having successfully weathered two Double Ten National Day celebrations, it is time for Tsai to move forward with more certainty and speed.

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