

A bolder second inaugural speech

Written by Jerome Keating
Saturday, 09 May 2020 03:58

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) is set to deliver her second inaugural address on May 20. As one who has for the past three decades written extensively on Taiwan's robust development, struggle for democracy and search for identity, I offer some thoughts for Tsai to consider in that address.

These past three decades have witnessed Taiwan's coming of age. In its move from a one-party state under martial law to a vibrant democracy, it has struggled with identity issues, shaken off the inevitable Stockholm syndrome that results from any people enduring nearly 40 years martial law and White Terror, and through it all maintained a strong, viable economy in a turbulent world.

This is Tsai's second and final four-year term, having won a clear mandate with her resounding election victory. Her win differs from those of former presidents Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) in 1996 and Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) in 2004, which were more votes of confidence. It also stands out against the re-election of former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) in 2012, when he defeated Tsai in her first run for the presidency.

Back in 2008, Ma had won with a resounding 58.44 percent of the vote, which in 2012 dropped to 51.6 percent. In 2008, Ma got 7,659,014 votes, but in 2012, this fell to 6,891,139 votes. Confidence in him was slipping.

By contrast, Tsai in 2016 won with 56.1 percent of the vote and 6,894,744 votes; last year, that lead increased to 57.13 percent of the vote and 8,170,231 votes. One could not ask for a much better vote of confidence.

Taiwanese clearly rejected the China-leaning gambit of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) candidate, Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), and countered a worldwide trend of populism. Tsai should express appreciation to those voters and promise to live up to their confidence. It is a time for action. There is still much to be done.

In support of this, Tsai's party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has maintained a legislative majority of 61 seats. It has not been given a complete carte blanche, for it received

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as many at-large seats (15) as the KMT.

However, of the seven seats the DPP lost in the legislature, only three went to the KMT. Voters seemed more interested in giving a voice to others as well, including the newly formed Taiwan People's Party, which gained five seats to become the third-largest party.

Nonetheless, by any standards Tsai's victory speaks as a mandate. It is therefore a time for boldness if it ever was. Tsai must consider what legacy she wishes to leave Taiwan.

What main issues must be addressed as the people continue to gain focus in their struggle for democracy?

On the matter of identity, Tsai simply needs to acknowledge and support the reality that the people continue to express. They obviously do not buy into the fallacy of the so-called "1992 consensus," so little time need be spent on that.

Yearly polls show a consistent overwhelming increase in how the people identify themselves primarily as Taiwanese alone and not as Chinese or as Chinese and Taiwanese. The people know they are Taiwanese; Tsai must simply remind them that "eternal vigilance is the price of freedom."

Internationally, the timing could not be better for calling on the rest of the world to acknowledge the reality of Taiwan's de facto independent state. This independent Taiwan has not only come through as an economic success story, but in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as well. It has done this while standing alone outside the WHO.

In reality, Taiwan already has visa-free entry into 146 countries compared with China's 71. Taiwan appreciates that recognition and remains a responsible player. However, it is time for others to up their game of responsibility to Taiwan in the arena of international recognition.

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All nations must be reminded how Taiwan is a mid-sized nation with a population larger than 70 percent of them, and a better GDP than 85 percent of them. Even in its self-imposed semi-lockdown status on the virus, Taiwan's economy is functioning well. Taiwan has been a true partner in both world affairs and the fight against the Wuhan virus; it is time for others to openly acknowledge this reality.

Back on Taiwan's home front, pension reform has been accomplished. It was a necessary, but unwelcome and unpopular task, one that Ma promised to tackle, but dodged throughout his eight years. It was leftover baggage from the days of one-party state privilege and bought loyalty. The future sustainability of the nation depended on that reform and Tsai did it.

Constitutional reform is another piece of leftover baggage. Half of Taiwan's troubles in the international scene are due to the fact that it carries a constitution that was made in 1947 for a different country and which was brought to Taiwan by a diaspora that had lost a civil war.

UN General Assembly Article 2758 states that it was the followers of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) who were tossed out of the UN — not the Taiwanese. The current Constitution — even with all its amendments — remains an albatross around Taiwan's neck.

From Taiwan's one-party state past, two other long-term items remain, transitional justice and stolen state assets. Reparation has begun, but it must be finished in the coming four years. This need exists and includes judicial reform as well.

Taiwanese can look with envy at how when West and East Germany merged, their transition was made with an appropriate cleansing of the past. The partisan judges had to be revetted; the Stasi secret files were protected and made available so that justice could be meted out. Taiwan must face this time with honesty; the blood and sufferings of too many families must be answered.

Finally, have no doubt about it, China remains Taiwan's enemy both ideologically and territorially. Taiwanese know that this hegemonic China is a wolf at the door. It is this wariness that has made Taiwan early on capable of guarding against the dangers brought by COVID-19.

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Ironically, it is this same China and not Taiwan that disturbs world peace by wanting to control the South China Sea. Taiwan can help as a guarantee of peace here as well; it stands between the South and East China Seas as a free Rock of Gibraltar. It is the linchpin of stability in Asia. The nature of its democracy allows it that responsibility.

These are many thoughts that Tsai can express to let the world know where Taiwan stands now and for the coming four years. If not all, but at least several of them can be brought together in an inaugural address, then I believe that Tsai will be ready for the challenges of those next four years and the nation will be on a steady track.

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