

Ko should talk less and do more

Written by The Liberty Times Editorial
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Seven years ago, Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), at the time a political neophyte with no party affiliation, was swept into Taipei City Hall with 57 percent of the vote.

Four years later, he secured a second term, but this time his share of the vote had dropped to 41 percent, with 270,000 fewer Taipei residents voting for him.

Seven years have passed, and his time in city hall has entered its final year. Despite his voter satisfaction ratings being low in polls, he was still brimming with self-confidence at a news conference on Dec. 24 last year to mark the completion of his seventh year, saying that when his final year was over he would have finished an impressive tenure as mayor, “because we have done such a lot.”

This is Ko, a physician trying his hand at governing and a politician fashioning his own brand. Following his ascension to the halls of power in the nation’s capital, he emphasized his ability to change Taipei and, coming from a humble background, the need to listen attentively to ordinary people and show a great level of affinity toward the public.

As someone with Asperger syndrome, he is known to be extremely blunt, but many Taipei residents are left speechless when they hear some of the things that come from his mouth.

Certainly not one to shy away from controversy, he is a darling of the news media, which can always rely on him to say something that generates stories. They egg him on, unable to get enough.

Ko holds himself in high regard, and is very confident of his abilities.

At the news conference, he was touting his own achievements, expounding upon the good and avoiding the not-so-good aspects of his endeavors in governance, with absolutely no trace of reflection on what he had perhaps got wrong.

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Even though he said before that the common malady of Taipei's past mayors is that they have all aspired to move from city hall to the Presidential Office, he has fallen foul of that very same malady himself.

Look at him now: Not only is he the mayor, he is also chairman of his own political party. It seems he has also been bitten by the presidential aspiration bug.

Coming from a humble background, and being called by the nickname Ko P, a nod to the fact that he is a professor, he is able to see things from the perspective of ordinary folk, not the political elite, and brings this perspective to how he governs the city.

One of the achievements that he returned to repeatedly during the news conference was how he had overseen the creation of green pedestrian walkways along roads that lack actual sidewalks.

This policy has had an actual impact on the everyday lives of people having to negotiate the streets and lanes of Taipei, making them much safer to walk on and reducing the number of traffic accidents.

This seemingly minor measure has made a significant difference to the lives of ordinary people, and was implemented with them in mind, as were the renovations to Nanmen Market (南門市場), Huannan Market (華南市場) and the Taipei First Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Market (台北第一果菜批發市場), as well as the introduction of new measures for stall holders.

In these, he has not lost sight of the goal of governing a city: to improve the lives of the people who live in it.

In other respects, Ko has allowed circumstances to go to his head. As Taipei's mayor, he has fallen prey to another malady that often plagues politicians: He is beginning to lose touch with the people.

His contention that “welfare for the elderly in Taipei is really good,” is but one example.

Purely from a numbers standpoint, it is true that the welfare budget for elderly people has increased, but the COVID-19 vaccination drive several months ago failed to take into account the digital divide and how it would affect older people and their access to the reservation system, leading to chaos.

In other areas of Taiwan, such as Kaohsiung, older residents were first asked to register their willingness to be vaccinated, and were then allocated a time and location to receive their shots, using the “Umi-machi style” in which seniors go to get their jabs at designated venues and remain seated while a team of medical staff move from one person to another to administer their vaccines.

Not so in Taipei.

It was the same with this year’s Chung Yang Festival, also known as the Double Ninth Festival, as it is held on the ninth day of the ninth month on the lunar calendar, which is traditionally used to pay respect to seniors.

Traditionally, local governments give out cash gifts to elderly people on this day. These cash handouts mean more than the other discounts and benefits available to seniors.

If the Taipei City Government had been so concerned about the cost, it could have considered reducing payments to wealthy people, but there was so much prevarication in city hall over the issue that Ko could hardly take any credit for having “progressive values.”

Thanks to Ko’s unique personality he has a certain tenacity, as well as some rather unusual ideas, making him a potential disruptor.

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During his first campaign for Taipei mayor, his mantra was “to improve Taiwan, we need to change the capital; to improve Taipei, we need to change the culture.”

Not only did he tout a “50-year urban plan” for Taipei, he also said he was committed to pulling down all illegal structures in the city, ideas that earned him many votes, contributing to his large share in 2014.

However, this was easier said than done.

Despite saying that he “would not sacrifice the interests of the many for the sake of the few, nor long-term objectives for that of short-term consideration, nor the national interest for the sake of a political party,” or that he would “do the right thing, reject doing the wrong thing and do [his] best in all things,” after seven years he has said much and achieved little.

He has made few improvements to the city and broken many promises.

The Taipei Dome project, one of the “five major cases” he promised to deal with before he assumed office, is still plagued by safety concerns. The traffic congestion issue in Taipei’s Neihu District (新湖) that he said he would solve is still a problem seven years on, with the area around the science park especially congested.

After eight years ago promising to build 50,000 social housing units, he has reduced the figure.

There are plenty of examples of politicians walking out of Taipei City Hall and into the Presidential Office, but it is not right to covet the position so obviously, especially when the decision is not yours to make — it is up to the voters — and when the presidential election is still a few years away.

Ko is certainly not trying to hide his ambition, broadcasting it in his actions and words.

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He has said that he weighed his options three years ago, but decided not to run.

Two years later he became chairman of his own political party, making his intention clear. It is perhaps because of this that he has been keen to distance himself from the pan-blue and pan-green camps, looking to find his own way with his Taiwan People's Party. He might be hoping to carve out his own niche, at times keeping his distance from the other parties, and at others working with them.

After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ko has made a thing of bashing the central government over its handling of the crisis.

Taiwan's response to the pandemic has actually has been good so far. Under the direction of the Central Epidemic Command Center, people have been able to go about their lives in a semblance of normality.

As a physician-turned-politician, Ko has been trying to take advantage of the situation, criticizing the central government's response, but at the same time doing less than well in the city he is charged with looking after.

Yet he refuses to change his ways, irrespective of what others might think of him. It is for this reason that he blew his own trumpet at the news conference.

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates has talked of how the 24-hour news cycle and the excessive politicization of headlines has increased rifts in US society. This phenomenon exists in Taiwan, too, and Ko and his manipulation of the media are an example of it.

In his final year as Taipei mayor, Ko's best option would be to concentrate on governing the city, to eke out achievements in the time he has left in the position.

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Taiwanese are watching him, and the proof is in the pudding, not in talking about how well it has been made.

Translated by Paul Cooper

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