

President or puppet

Written by George Yeh
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How do you tell the difference between a president of a young democracy enacting progressive change and a political puppet of the powers that be? To answer this question, look no further than Taiwan's "President" Ma Ying-jeou as he stops over in Seattle on his way home from a visit to Central America.

There was no visit to Washington, DC, as high-level visits between the US and Taiwan don't exist, a consequence of which is the very isolation that Ma has sought to address by inching Taiwan closer and closer into the arms of the "one China" policy.

Why is President Ma still "Mr Ma" despite a 58 percent mandate to elect him? Because he chooses it. In November last year, a high-level visit took place between China and Taiwan where negotiator Chen Yunlin addressed President Ma as "Mr Ma." When the choice of words is so very important to the international recognition of Taiwan, failure to correct language that is in line with the hierarchy of the Chinese Communist Party is unacceptable. After all, how much of the global community is confused by the "Chinese Taipei" designation that Taiwan must use in venues such as the Olympics? What's in a name, indeed.

The public support that put President Ma in office was based largely on economic promises, the most famous of which was his "6-3-3 Plan," a plan for 6 percent economic growth, per capita GDP of US\$30,000 and less than 3 percent unemployment. Ma has all but given up on addressing the economic issues that won him favor with the electorate, opting instead to disguise conciliatory policies with China as economic measures.

Despite some increased economic opportunities for Taiwan in the region, such as direct charter flights between China and Taiwan and the deregulation of Taiwanese investment in China [sic], President Ma's focus on such policies is wagging the dog to divert attention from a degradation of civil liberties back home. During Chen's visit, police were authorized to use excessive force on protesters. Afterwards, members of the opposition pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party were persecuted, some indicted and some held with no cause, including former president Chen Shui-bian. Although most of the media was already under the control of Ma's Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the scarcity of criticism of the Ma regime is a testament to the erosion of freedom of speech in Taiwan.

So here's hoping that during Ma's stopover in the US — the place of his education, the home of the greatest democracy in the world — he recognizes that he is indeed president of his own fledgling democracy and not a puppet for communist China.

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