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The KMT Backstroke

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Now that the Beijing Olympiad has reached its glorious conclusion, people in Taiwan are starting to turn their attentions back to the home front. The Olympics did not go very well for Taiwan, which ended up winning only 4 bronze medals, its worst result in 20 years. Even the baseball team could only manage a fifth-place finish, including a shocking 8-7 loss to China in extra innings. One of the few bright spots was the competitive spirit of athletes like Su Li-wen, who fought to the bitter end while losing her bronze medal match by a single point in extra time, despite having suffered a painful injury. The dedication that these men and women displayed is particularly impressive in light of the fact that they are not permitted to compete in their country's name, but rather under the odd moniker of "Chinese Taipei" (中華台北).

On the domestic front, things look grim as well. The stock market has plummeted, real wages are declining, exports are in a tailspin, and GDP estimates continue to be revised downwards. About the only things going up are unemployment and prices. These are worldwide problems, and the KMT government has numerous experts who are working on solutions. At the same time, however, the KMT also seems to be devoting considerable effort to restoring its ideological hegemony, attacking its enemies, promoting party loyalists cronies, and pursuing a pro-China agenda.

One prominent example of the first phenomenon concerns the controversy over the proposed renaming of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall as the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall, which was the subject of a post on this website in January 2008. At a recent Cabinet meeting, Premier Liu Chao-shiuan instructed the Executive Yuan to withdraw the former DPP government’s request to abolish the Organic Statue of the CKS Memorial Hall (國立中正紀念堂管理處組織條例廢止案), while also approving the abolition of the Organic Statue of the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall (國立台灣民主紀念館組織規程), thereby condemning the latter name to the dustbin of history and signifying the imminent return of hero worship of the former dictator. As for the issue of whether to restore the inscription 大中至正 on the Hall’s entry arch, Minister of Education Cheng Jei-cheng said that this would be discussed in a series of public forums.

Another sign of the revival of KMT ideology may be found in reports that the armed forces plan to reinstate the singing of “I Love China” (我愛中華), which features a line about “5,000 years since the nation was founded” (開國五千年), at evening assemblies of soldiers stationed at all military bases.

Efforts at purging DPP-appointed officials (拔綠官) are also continuing apace, including the effective demotion of Executive Yuan Deputy Secretary-General Chen Mei-ling, and the dismissal of Parris Chang as representative to Bahrain. Perhaps even more striking are the unrelenting attempts to convict former president Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 of corruption, which have included the declassification of secret documents relating to Chen’s use of the state affairs fund (國務機要費), a decision that may impact national interests. More recently, the KMT government has launched a wide-ranging investigation of Chen and his relatives on charges of laundering excess campaign funds. Such allegations have shocked, disappointed, and broken the hearts of many DPP supporters, but their legal implications remain unclear (Like the U.S., Taiwan has only recently begun to address the problem of campaign finance reform, and current laws contain numerous loopholes).

There is no doubt that the rooting out of corruption is an essential element of any democracy. Chen has admitted that he and his wife made mistakes, and both have withdrawn from the DPP. If he or members of his family have in fact broken the law, they should face justice for their actions. Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder if the current anti-Chen campaign is motivated by more than concerns over corruption, and might also constitute a means of currying favor with pan-blue hardliners while also diverting attention from the new government’s problems. Moreover, the tone of some attacks on Chen, his relatives, and even his acquaintances has at times taken on a chilling and even vindictive tenor, which suggests that some KMT leaders have never forgiven the son of a tenant
farmer for snatching away the power that they had been groomed to assume. All this, combined with the above-mentioned weeding out of former DPP officials, seems to be sending a clear message to any Taiwanese elites who might have doubts about professing their loyalty to the new government.

It also remains to be seen how diligent the KMT will be about tackling irregularities in its own ranks. For example, despite President Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九’s promises of clean government, the KMT-dominated parliament has so far failed to pass any significant legislation related to this issue, and has continued to obstruct the passage of so-called “sunshine laws” (陽光法案). Another thorny problem involves charges of dual citizenship among KMT elites, the most prominent being Legislator Diane Lee 李慶安, who has been accused of holding U.S. citizenship while serving in a number of elected offices. Nearly six months have passed since Next Magazine (壹週刊) broke the story, but the Legislative Yuan has yet to divulge any details of its ongoing investigation, while the Central Election Commission seems unable to reach any consensus on how to deal with the issue.

Eyebrows has also been raised over the decision by Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-pin 郝龍斌 (son of former Premier Hau Pei-tsun 郝柏村) to appoint Sean Lien 連勝文 (son of former Premier and Vice President Lien Chan 連戰) to serve as an EasyCard board member. Qualifications aside, the younger Lien’s reported monthly salary of NT$300,000 seems particularly galling to recent college graduates, many of whom are starting at jobs paying only NT$25,000 a month. Hau’s decision prompted the Apple Daily (蘋果日報) to issue a scathing editorial, which included the observation that “The specter of the old KMT has been haunting the land since even before the Ghost Month” (老國民黨幽靈早在鬼月之前，就已經四處作怪).

Of greatest concern to many Taiwanese, however, is the new government’s pro-China stance. While the current "low key”, “practical”, and “rational” approach to questions of national identity has gone a long way towards reducing tensions, the long-term benefits and costs for Taiwan remain to be seen. While the Cross-Strait atmosphere has improved, direct flights have as yet failed to result in large groups of Chinese tourists traveling to Taiwan (visitor numbers average 212 per day, and are dropping). Moreover, Beijing has yet to agree to direct cargo flights, and continues to deploy hundreds of missiles aimed at the island.

On the diplomatic front, the government has decided not to apply for full UN membership this year (as either the "Republic of China” or “Taiwan”), opting instead to seek "meaningful participation” in the august organization’s auxiliary associations. Accordingly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has prepared a proposal for the General Assembly asking it to support “the fundamental rights of the 23 million people of the Republic of China (Taiwan) to participate meaningfully in the activities of the United Nations specialized agencies”. The main goal of these efforts seems to be joining the WHO, but prospects seem dim indeed, especially since Wang Yi 王毅, head of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office, indicated that China would never accept Taiwan becoming a member of that organization, but would look instead into forming an international network to share data with Taiwan in cases of disease outbreaks. More recently, in spite of Ma’s calls for a “diplomatic truce”, in an August 18 letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Chinese Ambassador to the UN Wang Guangya 王光亞 stated that, “Taiwan is not a sovereign state. The claim by a very few countries that specialized agencies should allow the Taiwan region to ‘participate’ in their activities under the ‘principle of universality’ is unfounded”, essentially splashing ice-cold water on the KMT plan. The government’s next course of action is unclear.

It also seems significant that key allies such as the Vatican, Haiti, Guatemala, Paraguay, Panama and the Dominican Republic have chosen not to cosponsor the above-mentioned resolution. The actions of these allies are understandable, however, as some have begun to wonder whether the new government’s position includes the possibility of dual recognition, a point that Ma has been at pains to deny. Other allies have reached a different conclusion, as can be seen in the decision by the Dominican Republic to refer to the delegation led by Ma on his state visit as "China, Taiwan”. This did not seem to raise concerns among Taiwan’s new crop of diplomats and National Security Council officials, however, who argued that according to the 1992 Consensus (九二共識) Taiwan could be referred to as China, since each side had agreed to its own definition of the term (一中各表). The trend
of renaming Taiwan is now spreading to countries like Australia and Thailand, both of which have referred to the nation as "Chinese Taipei" on government websites.

Current trends have caused some concern in U.S. diplomatic circles, with recent reports indicating that officials who visited Taiwan earlier this month informed the KMT government of a "Two No’s" (二不) position, namely no hinting that China has sovereignty over Taiwan and no acceptance of China having final say over Taiwan’s participation in international organizations. This suggests that the U.S. government, once concerned about Chen’s government upsetting the status quo, may now have similar worries about the Ma government.

Anxiety on the diplomatic front, combined with the restoration of the name “Chunghwa Post” (中華郵政), confusion over China’s attempts to use the title “Taipei, China” (中國台北) for the Olympic team instead of “Chinese Taipei”, and uncertainty over whether the new government will push for the purchase of the F-16 C/D fighter, have caused many to wonder about the KMT government’s long-term intentions. For its part, KMT elites in favor of unification continue to visit China as often as they can, and some are said to be pushing for the new government to restore the Guidelines for National Unification (國家統一綱領). While the pace at which the KMT government will edge towards this goal remains to be seen, these issues may well continue to occupy worldwide attention for many months to come.