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Taiwan Top Five

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By Paul Katz
As we prepare to ring out 2008, here are a few thoughts about some of the leading stories that have shaped Taiwan during the past year:

1. **Back and Blue**: Ma Ying-jeou sweeps into office as Taiwan’s new president, winning a convincing majority of the popular vote based on a platform promising a more stable relationship with China, economic prosperity, and clean government. Cross-Straits tensions have declined markedly, while the opening of direct links should bring great benefits to the citizens of both China and Taiwan. At the same time, however, the economy remains in the doldrums (see #2) and there are also concerns about the future of the judicial system (see #3). The KMT’s return to power has also witnessed the rehabilitation of Chiang Kai-shek’s reputation (plus the name of his memorial hall), attempts to interfere with the mass media, and occasional expressions of anti-Japanese nationalism.

2. **Hard Times**: The TAIEX, once expected to top 10,000, is now languishing in the 4,000s, but it’s the working class that is truly suffering. As of November, the number of men and women who had lost their job had topped the half million mark, with Taiwan's 4.6% unemployment rate being one of the highest in East Asia and having the dubious distinction of topping the four little dragons. Other workers are being forced to take long periods of unpaid leave, which allows them to keep their jobs but not earn enough money to make ends meet. It looks to be a cold, dark winter, but hopefully things will improve once the world economy rebounds.

3. **Justice For All?** The vigorous prosecution of corruption cases involving current or former DPP officials (including unprecedented reliance on pre-trial detention), extensive use of police force against protestors, and switching of judges during judicial proceedings all suggest that Taiwan’s legal system is at risk of being transformed from a means of furthering the growth of civil society into a tool for the state to silence its rivals. Meanwhile, investigations into allegations of corruption against KMT figures appear to be going nowhere, while a KMT legislator shown to have dual citizenship is still enjoying plenty of perks from her prestigious and powerful position.

4. **And Then There Were Four**: Now entering its 20th year, Taiwan’s professional baseball league (CPBL) has shrunk to its original size of just four teams, with two others having been disbanded due to financial losses and gambling scandals. The local basketball league (SBL) is rumored to be in trouble as well, but baseball has always been at the heart of this country’s sporting scene, embodying both the best (exuberance, dedication) and the worst (inefficiency, corruption) aspects of Taiwanese culture. However, the smaller number of teams, combined with an influx of players returning from abroad, may spark improvements in the quality of the game and a return of its fan base. There is always hope.

5. **The Pandas Are Coming!** Actually they’re here, having arrived as an early Christmas gift on December 23 aboard a chartered 747 from Chengdu. Currently under quarantine in their lavish US$9.24 million Panda House at the Taipei Zoo, Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan (whose combined names mean “reunion”) are scheduled to be available for their adoring admirers just in time for the Lunar New Year. Some people have raised concerns about sovereignty (according to CITES, the panda gift is an “internal/domestic trade” transfer), but who could resist such cute and cuddly comfort from concerned communist cousins? Moreover, their arrival should do wonders for the local economy, especially in and around the Taipei Zoo.

So let us end the year on a note of optimism. Despite the troubles it has faced during the past year, Taiwan remains a symbol of openness and opportunity. Let us hope that the future brings tidings of comfort and joy.