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After the Avalanche

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Most Taiwan observers expected a convincing KMT victory in last Saturday’s Legislative Yuan elections, perhaps even a landslide. What we got was an avalanche, with the KMT garnering 81 of 113 seats (71.68%), as opposed to a paltry 27 for the DPP. The scale of the rout was unprecedented, especially since the KMT ended up with just over 51% of the popular vote, as opposed to approximately 37% for the DPP, numbers that do not differ that dramatically from those of past elections.

A wide range of factors contributed to the DPP debacle, including profound concerns with the slow pace of Taiwan’s economic growth and disappointment over corruption charges swirling around President Chen Shui-bian, his family members, and close associates, all of which appear to have contributed to a “throw the bums out” mentality. Structurally, the impact of the new single-district two-vote electoral system clearly favored the KMT by playing to its traditional strength of mobilizing voters at the grass-roots level. This election also seems to have sounded the death-knell for smaller parties that had not already rejoined the KMT, and signaled the continuing failure of Taiwan’s referendum system (this election’s referendums focused on anti-corruption and KMT party assets), particularly in terms of attracting enough voters (turnout barely exceeded 26% for each referendum).

All eyes now turn to the presidential elections, which are only two months away. Each candidate faces his own set of challenges. Ma Ying-jeou will need to avoid overconfidence and in-fighting among party leaders jockeying for position in the presidential administration he now seems poised to win, while also persuading the KMT leadership to use its overwhelming majority in the new legislature to enact measures that address the social and economic issues on the minds of most voters. In addition, he must convince the electorate that he will do his utmost to protect Taiwan’s sovereignty in any negotiations with China. For Frank Hsieh, the primary challenges will be to rally demoralized and disillusioned party members, overcome factional infighting, and emerge from Chen’s shadow as a viable candidate who can appeal to party faithful and independents. Both candidates will have to use the next few weeks to present their own visions for Taiwan’s future.

In terms of Cross-Straits relations, this election has convincingly demonstrated that the economy matters far more to most voters than political or ideological issues. Therefore, it seems reasonable to expect that the winner of March’s presidential election will make a concerted effort to improve Taiwan’s relationship with China, regardless of who is actually elected. If this is indeed the case, then it will be China’s task to tone down its rhetoric, remove some (if not all) of the hundreds of missiles pointing at Taiwan, and stress that China will respect Taiwanese culture, including this nation’s impressive democratic achievements.