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Where Do We Go from Here?

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With just three weeks until president-elect Ma Ying-jeou’s inauguration, many Taiwanese and their friends and relatives abroad are experiencing a sense of optimism, perhaps best expressed in the frequent utterances of the phrase *mashang jiuhao* 馬上就好, which can mean either “Everything will ready right away” or “Things will get better as soon as Ma takes power”. At the same time, however, there is also a growing sense of trepidation about some of the challenges facing the in-coming Ma administration:

1. To begin with, much of Taiwan’s non-Mainlander population has yet to be convinced that the new administration will be sensitive to their needs. For example, when the first round of cabinet appointments was announced, more than a few eyebrows were raised about the sizeable percentage of Mainlanders in the cabinet (as of this posting, approximately 25% of the new cabinet appointees were Mainlanders, who make up about 15% of Taiwan’s total population). Others voiced dismay that southern Taiwanese elites like Chan Chi-hsien 詹啟賢, who worked hard to get out the vote for the Ma campaign, ended up being passed over for key positions. While the latest round of appointments has proven somewhat less controversial (at least in terms of sub-ethnic politics, but see #2 and #3 below), people will still be watching to see how things develop.

A related and perhaps even thornier issue is that of transitional justice (轉型正義), and in particular what to do about the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (國立中正紀念堂), which President Chen Shui-bian’s administration attempted to rename as the National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall (國立台灣民主紀念館), only to have its efforts blocked by the Legislative Yuan. A similar problem surrounds the Cihhu Presidential Burial Palace (慈湖陵寢), to which Ma paid an emotional visit shortly after his election (see previous blogposts for discussions of these two sites). Concerns have also been expressed by the appointment of Wang Ching-feng 王清峰, former convener of the March 19 Shooting Truth Investigation Special Committee (三一九槍擊事件真相調查特別委員會), to the position of Minister of Justice.

2. A second challenge involves the merits of bringing back officials from previous KMT administrations, which has given rise to a sense of “meet the new boss, same as the old boss” (from The Who’s rock classic “Won’t Get Fooled Again”). One Chinese expression currently being used to describe the situation is “old wine in new bottles” (老酒裝新瓶), although some wags prefer “old wine in old bottles” (老酒裝老瓶). While administrative experience can be most valuable, questions have been raised about when the younger generation will get its chance. There is also a pressing need to avoid returning to the corrupt politics of previous decades of one-party rule, especially since the overwhelming KMT majority in the Legislative Yuan bodes ill for the prospect of checks and balances. After years of voiciferous complaints about corruption during Chen Shui-bian’s presidency, it would be particulary ironic if this spectre were to haunt his successor.

Another disturbing harbinger is a proposal put forth by the Soochow University (東吳大學) administration to restrict faculty participation in political talk shows. Although this proposal failed to pass the faculty senate, one professor is said to have withdrawn from a pro-green talk
show due to pressure from the university authorities, including the Board of Directors. The current President of Soochow University is none other than Premier-designate Liu Chao-shiuan 劉兆玄, another former KMT official who has served as Minister of Transportation (1993) and Vice-Premier (1997).

3. Achieving a suitable framework for talks with China constitutes the third challenge. In the short term, establishing direct links and allowing Chinese tourists into Taiwan should not be too difficult to achieve, especially since the PRC seems highly willing to display its magnanimity in light of the Tibet fiasco. Things will get tougher as soon as issues of sovereignty are raised, however, as the Ma administration will have to convince the people, and especially the 42% of voters (over 5.4 million people) who supported the DPP, that it will not “sell out” to China. The utility of the so-called “1992 Consensus” (九二共識) in future negotiations also remains to be seen, while the appointment of “deep green” former Taiwan Solidarity Union (台聯) legislator Lai Hsin-yuan 賴幸媛 as chairperson of the Mainland Affairs Council (陸委會) has succeeded in offending many KMT members, some of whom are striving to assert their own authority over future negotiations. And, as if the situation wasn’t complex enough, the Ma administration will have to balance its desire for improved cross-Straits relations with the strategic needs of Japan and especially the United States, which will welcome exit of “troublemaker” Chen but may be wary of Taiwan’s becoming too cozy with China. (See also the analysis by Ting Yu-chou 丁渝洲, a former head of the National Security Bureau (國家安全局) during KMT rule)

4. Finally, as noted in this blog’s most recent post, it is still the economy (stupid). Closer links to China will come just as many Taiwanese and Western businesses are starting to abandon the Middle Kingdom in favor of shifting operations to India and the newly developing economies of Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and even Burma). More importantly, prices of essential commodities have yet to rise to free market levels, having been frozen during the recent election season. The Ma administration hopes to resolve this issue with one huge hike, which can then be blamed (with some credibility) on the out-going Chen administration. If prices continue their upward trend, however, Ma may end up like George Bush did in 1992. Ma has already expressed his concerns about his administration’s ability to fulfill its campaign promises regarding the economy during a speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei on April 29.

Increased Chinese tourism and investment in the housing market may help cushion any economic shocks, but questions remains as to who will really benefit from such growth. Most people tend to forget that those who profited from the stratospheric stock and housing prices of the mid-1980s were not ordinary citizens but wealthy speculators, many of whom had ties to the KMT. One wonders what they might be thinking now…