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It’s Still the Economy, Stupid

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Ma Ying-jeou’s convincing victory in Taiwan’s presidential election shows that the politics of fear are no match for the politics of the pocketbook. While the sight of four KMT legislators trying to force their way into the DPP campaign headquarters raised the specter of a return to the dreaded days of the White Terror, a majority of voters seem to have been convinced by the slew of apologies that followed, and assumed that Ma’s victory would end eight years of government gridlock that had contributed to Taiwan’s economic slowdown. While Ma’s hesitancy to explain whether he had formally renounced his green card might have caused some to wonder if he might jump ship in a crisis, most people do not appear to have considered this a legitimate issue in today’s hard times. And, while images of Chinese troops suppressing Tibetan uprisings brought back bitter memories of the 228 Incident (see my previous blogpost), voters appear to have reasoned that the benefits of KMT rule far outweighed any risk of seeing the PLA marching through the streets of Taipei in the future.

For his part, Frank Hsieh and his allies proved unable to overcome disappointment with DPP rule, while corruption scandals contributed to a “throw the bums out” mentality. The DPP may also have engaged in a bit too much negative campaigning against Ma and his family, while not placing enough emphasis on the substantial achievements made while in power (including the completion of the High Speed Railway, the reform of the banking system, etc.) as well as their vision for Taiwan’s future.

In the end, the people of Taiwan voted for Ma in hopes that this would lead to greater stability and prosperity in the future. His new government, supported by a nearly three-quarters majority in the Legislative Yuan, will have an opportunity to enact its policies that the DPP never enjoyed, but little excuse should campaign promises go unfulfilled.

What the KMT’s return to power means for Taiwan’s future remains to be seen, but one should give utmost credit to the maturation of its democratic system. Unlike what happened following the presidential election of 2000, when the KMT lost power, this time there were no protests or riots, just tears and concern for what may lie in store. The day after the election, my family and visited the venerable Huang Kunbin (affectionately known as ‘Uncle Kunbin’ or Khun-pin peh 嘉濱伯 in Southern Min) at his some in Tainan County. The star of the touching documentary about Taiwan’s farmers entitled “Let it Be” (Wumile 無米樂), Khun-pin-beh is a symbol of all that is good about Taiwan. He was philosophical about the results, noting that: “When the curtain comes down, it’s time for the play to end.” We also hung out with a group of college students who were active Hsieh supporters. They had ridden over on their motorbikes to comfort Uncle Kunbin, managing to keep their spirits up despite their disappointment.

It is time to move forward, and Taiwan is ready.