

## **After Taiwan's Presidential Election: Ma Ying-jeou's Challenges**

Barthélémy Courmont

The Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Ma Ying-jeou won a landslide victory in Taiwan's presidential poll on March 22, restoring his party to the governing role it had played for more than five decades before being ousted by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2000. Ma's victory is historic. It is the second peaceful change of power since 2000, when the KMT conceded power to the DPP after Chen Shui-bian won the millennial election. Now, after two elections, the second change of power took place, proof of the maturity of Taiwan's fledgling democracy.

The KMT's Ma-Siew ticket won 7,658,724 votes, or 58.45%, while the DPP's Chang-Chang ticket gained 5,445,239 votes, or 41.55%. The KMT ticket won over the DPP ticket by an important margin of 2,213,485 votes, or approximately 16.89%. Both the number of votes and the margin of winning were unprecedented (the 2004 result was 50.1% for the DPP and 49.9% for the KMT). The turnout rate of the Presidential election was 76.33%. After the results, the DPP candidate Frank Hsieh conceded defeat and congratulated Ma Ying-jeou and Vincent Siew for being elected as the 12th President and Vice President of the Republic of China.

In his first public address after his election, Ma said he has heard the people's voice, which is a longing for economic prosperity, political stability, social harmony, and peace in the Taiwan Strait. He said that the landslide victory belongs to all the Taiwanese people, not himself or the KMT. He promises the people a clean "sunshine government" of efficiency to work for the well-being of the people. With an important majority at the Parliament since the January 12 legislative election, the KMT has a comprehensive power to engage Taiwan towards economic and political reforms, including a new era in the cross Strait relations.

The U.S. President George W. Bush issued a statement on March 22, congratulating Ma Ying-jeou on his victory. President Bush praised Taiwan as a beacon of democracy to Asia and the world. Bush said, "I believe the election provides a fresh opportunity for both sides of the Taiwan Strait to reach out and engage one another in peacefully resolving their differences." During the campaign,

the U.S. has been watching carefully the cross-Strait relations, and has been concerned by a potential deterioration of the current situation between Mainland China and Taiwan, notably in the case of an independence claimed by Chen Shui-bian.

In this prospect, regarding the “Returning to the U.N.” and “Joining the U.N.” plebiscites, the turnout rate was merely approximately 35%, which fell short of the minimum threshold required for the plebiscites to pass (50% of all eligible voters in the last national election). The referendums, held alongside the presidential election, were seen as potentially explosive, especially because one of them suggested applying under the name of Taiwan, signaling a separate identity from China.

#### A SHORT PORTRAIT OF THE NEW PRESIDENT

With family origins in Hunan province, in Mainland China, born in Hong Kong on July 1, 1950, Ma came to Taiwan with his KMT apparatchik father in childhood. He studied at the prestigious Chien Kuo High School in Taipei and went on to earn a law degree from National Taiwan University in 1972. He obtained an LL.M. from New York University in 1979 and an S.J.D. from the Harvard Law School five years later. He worked as a consultant at the Law Office of the First National Bank of Boston in 1980-81, and as associate for Cole and Deitz Law Office in New York briefly before joining the University of Maryland Law School.

Married to his classmate Christine Chou, Ma returned to Taipei together with his wife in 1984 to serve as deputy director of the First Bureau of the Office of the President. He was also an official interpreter in English for late President Chang Ching-kuo. He worked as a senior assistant to President Chang in 1988 and a deputy secretary-general of the KMT. He was vice chairman of the Mainland Affairs Council from 1991 to 1993 and minister of justice from 1993 to 1996.

In 1998, Ma beat Chen Shui-bian in the mayoral election in Taipei. He was re-elected mayor of the special municipality in 2002, position he kept until 2006.

Elected KMT chairman in 2005, Ma was indicted for corruption in connection with the alleged misuse of his expense account while he was mayor of Taipei. He was acquitted twice. But the Supreme Court has yet to announce the last verdict on his case.

## DECISIVE REVERSE VOTES

Alongside his capacity to be perceived as a 'Mr Clean' for his anti corruption involvements, Ma managed to reverse votes in some key provinces, and won in six counties and cities where KMT lost in the last presidential race in 2004. The six counties and cities are Taichung County, Changhua County, Yilan County, Tainan City, Chiayi City and Kaohsiung City.

Besides his dramatic advance in the North of Taiwan and the small islands (with more than 95% in low-populated Kinmen island!), Ma garnered 58.84% of the votes in Taichung County, central Taiwan, higher than 41.16% recorded by Frank Hsieh, by a margin of 151,992 votes. In 2004, KMT's presidential candidate Lien Chan lost to President Chen Shui-bian, who was running for a second term, in Taichung County by a small margin.

In Changhua County, central Taiwan, Ma won 419,700 votes, or 57.59% of total valid ballots, 110,566 votes higher than Hsieh's 309,134 votes or 42.41%. In 2004, Lien lost to Chen by 33,168 votes in that county. In Yilan County, northeastern Taiwan, Ma grabbed 130,951 ballots or 51.42%, 7,251 votes higher than Hsieh's 123,700 votes or 48.58%. In 2004, the KMT lost 39,487 votes to the DPP. In the southern city of Chiayi, Ma netted 7,261 votes more than Hsieh, while the KMT lost 18,626 votes in 2004. Ma also enjoyed more ballots than Hsieh in the southern city of Tainan, with a margin of 6,219 votes. But in 2004, the KMT lost as many as 67,611 ballots to the DPP. In addition, the southern port city of Kaohsiung also witnessed Ma win more ballots than Hsieh by a margin of 28,885 votes, compared to the KMT's loss of as many as 193,535 votes in 2004. Ma's win in Kaohsiung City was beyond expectation, as Hsieh claimed earlier that he would win at least 150,000 more votes than Ma in the port city, where he served as mayor for at least six years.

Besides the aforementioned counties and cities, Ma scored a landslide victory in all the northern counties and cities, lagged "slightly" behind five southern counties, including Yunlin County, Chiayi County, Tainan County, Kaohsiung County, and Pingtung County.

## A NEW RELATION WITH MAINLAND CHINA?

According to both his staff and most analysts, one of the most urgent task facing Ma Ying-jeou besides the economy is to improve relations between Taiwan and

Mainland China. Analysts expect Beijing and Taipei will now reopen talks on tourism and direct air links, but said the more sensitive political issues would be put aside for a while.

"Taiwan and China will resume dialogue soon on the model of the '1992 consensus' to discuss practical issues without having to touching on sovereignty issues," said Cao Jingxing, a political analyst at China's Tsinghua University, interviewed by Taiwanese media.

China still claims sovereignty over Taiwan, which split from the mainland in 1949 after a civil war, and has threatened to invade the self-ruled island if it declares independence. Under the 1992 consensus, Beijing and Taipei accepted the formula of 'one China' but agreed to interpret it in their own way, leading to Taiwan's current status of de facto but undeclared nationhood. In 1993, they opened their first semi-official talks in Singapore, but they were suspended a few years later.

Chang Wu-yue, of the Tamkang University Institute of China Research, predicted an "immediate reopening" of talks between Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation and China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait. The two semi-official bodies are the main points of contact between the two sides, which do not have government relations. However, he was cautious about the possibility of a quick breakthrough. "Whether any consensus on key issues can be achieved remains to be seen."

"The election outcome certainly is the best-case scenario for Beijing," said Drew Thompson, director of China Studies at the Nixon Center in Washington, adding that "the challenge for Beijing going forward will be to find a suitable approach to the new leadership in Taiwan."

Reunification has seemed an ever more distant dream during the past eight years when Taiwan has been led by the independence-minded Chen Shui-bian, the island's first non-KMT president. With the KMT back in the driving seat, Beijing may be hoping for a new beginning, but forward momentum does not come easy in the delicate and intensely emotional diplomatic play across the Taiwan Strait.

In the post election relation, China's key priority should be to create an atmosphere where the current peaceful status quo can be solidified, without antagonizing Taiwanese concerned about losing independence, analysts argue.

"Beijing will have to be prepared to compromise and soften its tone and make palatable proposals, while recognizing the political realities that Taiwan politicians must operate in," said Thompson.

China is likely to welcome the fact that not only did its preferred candidate win, but two controversial referendums about seeking U.N. membership for Taiwan also failed. However, some foreign observers warned China remained too constrained by its previous tough stance on Taiwan and domestic hardline constituencies to be able to produce any meaningful change.

"The problem is you have very powerful forces in politics that are very nationalistic. You have the military, you have the security forces," said Bruce Jacobs, a China scholar at Australia's Monash University. "It's in the military's interest to keep tensions in the Taiwan Straits high, because if there's tension, they are likely to get higher budgets and more military toys to play with." The result for ties between China and Taiwan, Jacobs added, was "more of the same."

#### TOWARDS A 'MUTUAL NON-DENIAL' POLICY?

Ma stated that his future government would focus on improving strained cross-strait relations under the principle of "mutual non-denial," while restating that he would consider boycotting the upcoming Beijing Olympics if the crackdown worsened in Tibet.

Further, he told foreign media that he has no plans to visit China in the near future, but aims at working on "substantive issues" first, including pursuing economic cooperation and signing a peace agreement to terminate the current state of hostility between Taipei and Beijing.

To break the current deadlock across the Taiwan Strait, the new KMT administration will negotiate separate economic and peace agreements with China, he emphasized. "We will sign a peace agreement with China to terminate the hostility across the Taiwan Strait," he went on, "I will explore the possibility of reaching consensus with China on the issue of our international space, including our bilateral and multilateral relations with other parts of the world."

Also, he indicated that allowing more Chinese tourists to visit Taiwan and local banks to invest in China's financial market were also crucial to improving cross-strait

ties.

In addition to opening talks with China, Ma proposed reopening negotiations on signing bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the U.S., Japan and Singapore. He specifically condemned Chen Shui-bian's government for refusing to sign the deal under the formal name used by Taiwan at the World Trade Organization (WTO) -- The Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu, and instead requesting to conclude the agreement under the name "Taiwan." The previous FTA negotiation failed partly because of Chinese pressure, he explained. "We are ready to resume negotiations with Singapore under the name we use in the WTO, if that is acceptable to Singapore."

Regarding the failed referendums held alongside the presidential election, he stressed that the government of the Republic of China actually withdrew from the U.N. in 1971, and expressed his willingness to be flexible on which title to use in apply to regain membership in the international body. Entering the U.N. under the name of Taiwan was "tantamount to a disaster," he said. "It caused very important downgrading of the mutual trust between Taiwan and the U.S. and antagonized many of our friends in the U.N.," he contended.

On the other hand, Ma Ying-jeou restated that he would look over Chinese suppression of Tibetan protesters carefully in the upcoming months. "If the situation in Tibet worsens, we would consider the possibility of not sending athletes to the Games," added the president-elect, who said he has attended each commemoration events of the bloody crackdown in Beijing's Tiananmen Square since June 4, 1989. "I did this out of a deep commitment to human rights," he continued.

#### TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF TAIWAN-CHINA-U.S. RELATIONS

The triangular relation Taiwan-China-U.S. is also among the priorities of the next administration in Taiwan. At a round-table meeting "The Meaning and Implications of the Presidential Election" held by the New Taiwanese Foundation the day after Ma's victory, most of the cross Strait relations experts in attendance agreed that Ma Ying-jeou's election would improve cross Strait relations and rebuild the trust between Taiwan and the U.S. However, the tension across the Strait could not be easily reduced in a short period of time and Ma's more open cross Strait policies would eventually hinge on the attitude of Mainland China. Participants in the meeting yesterday included, among others, Nat Bellocchi, former Chairman of the American

Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Douglas Paal, former Director of the AIT/Taipei, Shelly Rigger, Brown Associate Professor of Political Science at Davidson College, and Chu Yun-han, Research Fellow, Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica.

During the meeting, Bellocchi stated that he believed, “After Ma assumes office, it is predictable that cross-Strait relations will improve. Although the improvement of Taiwan-U.S. relations is not Ma’s first priority (we may also notice that the E.U. is looking forward to increase its economic ties with Taiwan), the relationship between Taiwan and the U.S. will surely warm up. However, the tensions across the Taiwan Strait will not be reduced immediately.”

Rigger also predicted an improvement in cross-Strait relations after Ma’s election. However, she said, “Ma’s election does not necessarily mean that all of his opinions will be in sync with Beijing. It is predictable that there will be progress in cross Strait relations. However, the extent of the progress is still something that needs to be observed.”

Alan Romberg, a former Deputy Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning in the Clinton administration, said that “Ma’s election will reduce the tension across the Strait. A normal interaction between the two sides of the Strait will be activated. However, Mainland China will have to demonstrate its goodwill in dealing with the relations with Taiwan. If it keeps pressurizing Ma, asking for concessions, it will undermine the ability of Taiwan’s new leader to consolidate domestic political support.” On Taiwan-U.S. relations, Romberg opined that mutual trust between Washington and Taipei would be rebuilt and that the long nonexistent triangular relations between the U.S., Mainland China and Taiwan would gain ground.

#### POST ELECTION OBSERVATIONS BY PRO-DPP MEDIA

The media in Taiwan is as free as within any other improved democracy, but also particularly politically involved (and usually identified ‘blue’ for the pro-KMT and ‘green’ for the pro-DPP), has reacted to Ma’s victory by pointing out the important challenges the next administration will have to face and, at the same time, identified the KMT’s victory as a new era in both Taiwan politics and cross Strait relations. A few observations from pro-DPP analysts, categorized in five different sections, have also been made immediately after the result, some quite skeptical about Ma’s ability to provide a comprehensive change in both domestic politics and foreign policy:

- 1) The election of Ma, generally considered a "mainlander" politician, by a wide margin at a time when so-called "indigenous consciousness" had been whipped to a new high by ill-motivated Taiwanese politicians, was attributed more to the public being disgusted with a corrupt presidency of Shui-bian than to the political wisdom and strength of Ma. Indeed, as a humble politician without great interest in political power, Ma is sometimes being perceived as a politician lacking decisiveness and boldness in ruling Taiwan in a chaotic and complicated situation marked by a deep ethnic split and public mistrust in politicians in general.
- 2) Even though emphasized by the KMT and the DPP throughout the campaign to the contrary, the election process, nevertheless, was characterized largely by a negative tone, particularly toward the end of the campaign. Innuendoes, mud-slinging and character assassination abounded. It was heartening to see, however, that the KMT in particular still strived to offer some "beef" in their platform.
- 3) As the situation stands now, it does not appear justified to pin too much hope on Ma in bringing about a better Taiwan in a significant way in the short term. The first order of business for him should be to make great efforts to unify and control his own party machine.
- 4) His mainland origin would be one of Ma's greatest weaknesses in handling future cross strait relations. He must take special care in walking a thin line between vigorously promoting cross-strait exchanges and not seemingly kowtowing to Beijing under the principle of "one China." Indeed, his inherent weakness in being classified as a "mainlander" may have prompted China to have second thoughts on whether to support him. Instead, it may decide to befriend pro-Beijing native Taiwanese, who will be much easier to initiate and implement cross-strait policies without fear of being accused of selling out Taiwan. For Americans, the misgivings about Ma getting too close to mainland China under such schemes as the "cross Strait common market" are always present. Pro-DPP experts believe that as a strategic maneuver, the U.S. supports an independent Taiwan so that the island may serve as an anti-Communist vanguard in the Asia-Pacific region. This is why the Chen administration, despite its corrupt scandals, incompetence and wanton manipulation of populism, survived so long because of its continuous backing by the U.S.

5) Last, President Ma must be ready to face a country with serious economic problems (which have dominated the campaign's debates) and stiff and fierce opposition posed by the DPP, although the KMT dominates the Parliament.

Barthélémy Courmont (PhD), is Research-Fellow at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations (IRIS), Head of the Taiwan Office. He recently published *L'autre pays du matin calme. Les paradoxes nord-coréens*, Paris, Armand Colin.