

Ma doesn't deserve a second term

By Lin Terng-yaw 林騰鶴 /

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Sept. 3 was Armed Forces Day in Taiwan. This year, with the Republic of China's centennial approaching, the day provided an opportunity for retired senior officers to gather and show their support for a particular political party. News media showed these retirees taking the standpoint of their favored party and questioning what justification the chairman of a smaller party with no administrative resources might have to stand as a candidate in next year's presidential election.

Their concern has something to do with the pressures created by an unreasonable electoral system, but it also demonstrates their poor grasp of democracy. It also runs contrary to the military's mission to protect all the nation's citizens. As soldiers in a democratic country, it might be a good idea for them to also consider what justification President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has for seeking a second term, in light of the following concerns.

The foremost reason why Ma does not merit a second term is that he has failed to raise the quality of constitutional governance. A flawed system of constitutional government has gone from bad to worse on his watch. Ma once said he would not serve as chairman of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) if elected president, but later went back on his pledge. He said that he would dispense with the KMT's assets, but the party can still avail itself of the NT\$2.89 billion (US\$95.9 million) it gained from its stock investments last year. This makes a mockery of the idea of fair competition between political parties.

Ma also said that once he had been in office for two years, ie, some time last year, he would set about reforming our system of government to identify the imperfections in the system that go against the principle of responsibility in politics by giving the president power without responsibility. He has failed to make good on this promise, too. Ma still benefits from a flawed government system that concentrates enormous powers in his office.

Second, Taiwan's fiscal deficit keeps getting bigger. During the three-and-a-half years Ma has been in office, the deficit has gone up by more than it did during the entire eight-year presidency of former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁). The minister of finance behaves more like a minister of economic affairs — he knows how to throw money around to stimulate the economy, but he doesn't know how to reduce government spending or uphold fairness in taxation. As a result, the gap between rich and poor grows wider each day.

The third point is the decline of the educational system under Ma. The quality of education keeps falling, while badly planned changes have been made to the exam system, causing fear and a sense of hopelessness among parents and students. Flawed and inappropriate assessments have failed to weed out poor-quality private colleges. On the contrary, they have prompted technical colleges to recruit "education mercenaries" and academic figureheads so that they can get promoted to the status of "universities of science and technology."

With new universities springing up all over, some of these schools have become breeding grounds for unemployment and moral degeneration. Some private college owners have absconded with their schools' assets. Since financial control at these colleges is often inadequate, parents may find that, having paid fees twice as high as those at state-run institutions, what their children get in return is moral decadence and the prospect of unemployment. Who wouldn't be upset?

Fourth, there have been numerous public safety issues during Ma's term. Food safety was called into question because industrial plasticizer was found in many foods and drinks. Repeated fires at Formosa Plastics Group's sixth naphtha cracker project in Yunlin County have caused worries over industrial safety, as well as destabilizing the chain of production when the plant's operations were stopped.

Flaws in medical safety were recently exposed when surgeons at National Taiwan University Hospital transplanted organs taken from the body of an HIV-positive donor. Other safety problems include urban crime, land subsidence and forest soil erosion.

Ma, who likes to brag about cutting the excise tax on rice wine, cannot shirk his responsibility for all these safety issues. If, despite all the personnel, material and financial resources invested in him by the public, he cannot even manage to ensure that basic inspections and safety checks are carried out, why would the public want to leave him in charge?

The fifth reason that Ma is not worth a second term is that he has appointed a president of the Judicial Yuan who lacks the motivation for reform. Ma had to apologize for nominating a controversial candidate to serve as a justice of the Constitutional Court, and several judges, prosecutors and court clerks have made decisions that earned them the label of "dinosaurs." All these incidents have badly dented the public's confidence in the judiciary and show how ineffectual judicial reforms have been.

Moreover, salaries and benefits enjoyed by civil servants are clearly out of proportion to their performance. This phenomenon has been criticized by Control Yuan President Wang Chien-shien (王建煊) and Examination Yuan President John Kuan (關中) on more than one occasion, but the system for evaluating civil servants' performance and getting rid of poor performers is riddled with controversy and has yet to be resolved.

There have also been instances of collective corruption and malpractice in the customs service and in Department of Health hospitals. This problem cannot be resolved just by setting up an anti-corruption commission under the auspices of the Judicial Yuan if it merely goes through the motions of overseeing the powers of prosecutors and judicial officers.

The sixth and final category for concern is that the authorities expropriate land according to its market price, but do not tax property and land based on its market value. What kind of land and housing justice is that? And why has this administration waited until near the end of Ma's term to figure out that taxing land according to its market price is the just way of doing things?

As the rich speculate on property and land deals, why can't the government impose taxes based on the market price? And if all income from salaries is taxed, why isn't income in the form of the houses, cars and other perks given by companies and corporations to their directors and supervisors subject to tax, as it is in Germany? Why, for that matter, is there no tax on income from profits gained from stock market transactions? How can the tax system be called just when tax is imposed on wages earned through toil and sweat but not on the profits made through speculation in the air-conditioned offices of securities companies?

Ma is chairman of the KMT, and his party and its allies occupy almost three-quarters of the seats in the legislature. Yet, after three years as president, he has failed to demonstrate a broad vision for upgrading the quality of Taiwan's constitutional governance, safeguarding the public's livelihood and ensuring equal access to education for the less privileged members of society, or for ensuring safety and justice for society as a whole.

In view of all this, there is no reason for Ma to serve a second term.

Lin Terng-yaw is a law professor at Tunghai University.

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