

Ineffective Leadership and Incompetent Governance: The Two-year Anniversary of the Ma Administration

| *Chih-cheng Lo*

In March 2008, Ma Ying-jeou was elected president of Taiwan, winning over 58 percent of the vote. Two years later, Ma's approval rating has dropped to less than 30 percent. His distrust index has become consistently lower than his trust index since the third quarter of 2009. After two years in office, Ma is now faced with grave leadership crises, and his administration team has encountered severe crises of governance. Ma has won the presidential election with large majority votes, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which controls over two-thirds of the legislative seats, has given endorsement of Ma's policies, and Ma has determined to take up the KMT chairmanship in June 2009—all of these have enabled the KMT to merge three establishments, namely the administration, the legislature, and the party itself, into one body. In effect, the authorities hardly have to subject themselves to any mechanism of checks and balances. Yet the government's performance over the past two years has yielded highly embarrassing results.

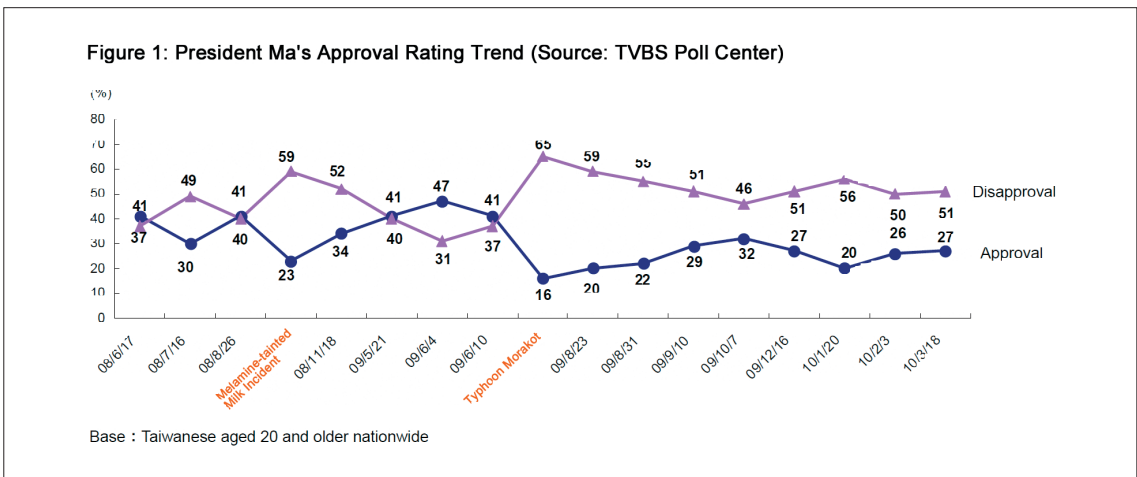
Apart from Ma's falling polls, the Taiwanese electorate has also graded Ma's performance in government through a series of election results since last year. In a referendum on September 26, 2009, Penghu residents rejected a proposal to establish casinos in the county through a referendum, a policy vigorously promoted by the KMT-controlled central and local governments. On the same day, the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) candidate Liu Jian-guo won the legislative by-election in Yunlin County, triggering a domino effect on a number of following legislative by-elections in which the KMT was repeatedly defeated. Last December's county and municipal elections saw little change in the seats respectively held by the KMT and the DPP, but the DPP had garnered a record-high percentage of the total vote share. After that, the DPP won all three legislative by-elections on January 19 and later three of another four legislative by-elections on February 27. These election results showed that the people had clearly flunked Ma in his mid-term exams.

How do we further assess the performance of Ma and the KMT over the past two

years? By looking into trends in polls, factors that affected the polls, and future prospects, we offer some initial analysis as follows:

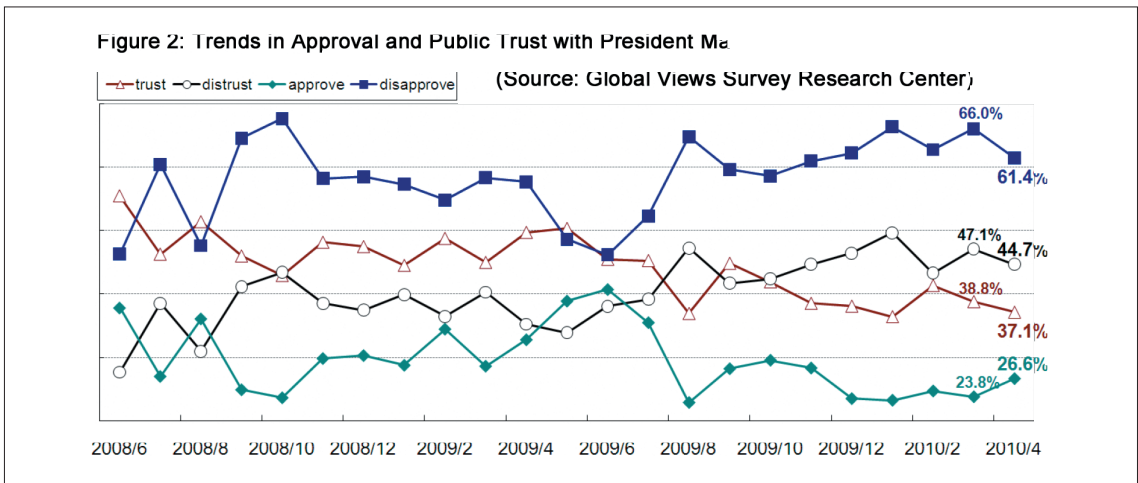
The Public's Changed Opinions of the Ma Administration

An old proverb says: "A regime is defined by its first hundred days in power." Obviously, Ma had not used his honeymoon period with the electorate well, because he failed to quickly demonstrate his competence in governance and policy directions during those early days in office. According to polls conducted by the TVBS Poll Center over a sustained period of time (see Figure 1), one month after Ma's inauguration, the president's approval rate (41 percent) had edged closer to his disapproval rate (37 percent). The polls also showed that, two months after the presidential inauguration, Ma's disapproval rate had approached 50 percent, whereas his approval rate had slid to only 30 percent. Slightly different from the TVBS polls, surveys carried out by the Global Views magazine revealed Ma's disapproval rate has always been higher than his approval rate since he came into office. There is not a single day during the past two years that saw Ma's approval rate rise higher than his disapproval rate (see Figure 2).



We noticed some common developments and trends in public opinions from these polls conducted by two different media outlets. First, Ma's disapproval rate reached its first climax at the end of September 2008. Incidents caused by melamine-tainted milk products took place shortly before the end of September and spiraled into a severe domestic situation. However, the Ma administration's improper management of these

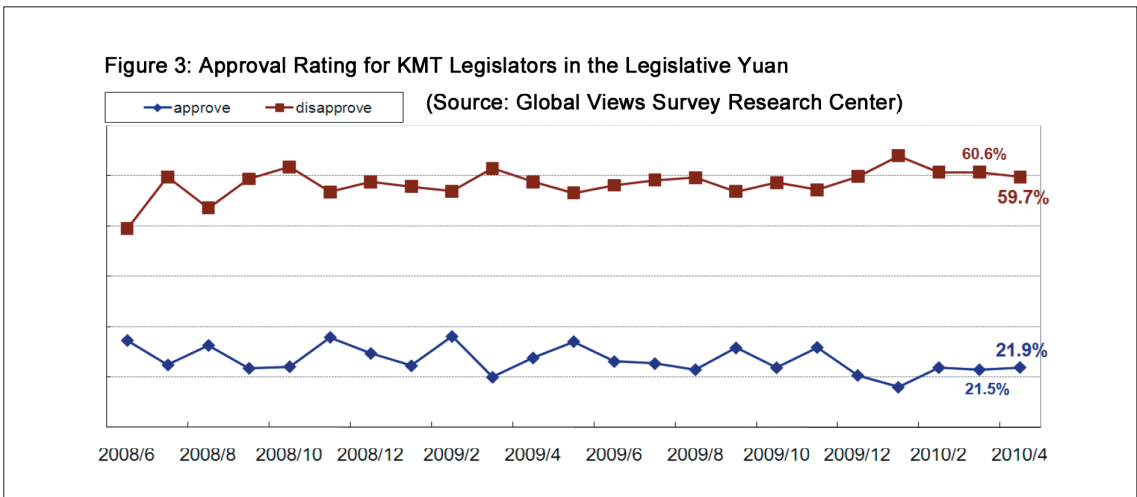
incidents had cast a shadow of health threats over the Taiwanese society. Furthermore, disapproval with the government hit another climax after the devastation brought by Typhoon Morakot on August 8, 2009. Since then on, Ma's disapproval rate has always stood at around 60 percent (see Figure 2). TVBS polls also pointed out Ma's disapproval rate has constantly remained higher than 50 percent. Finally, Ma's approval rate had plunged to its lowest point (16 percent) after Typhoon Morakot, and from that time on his approval rating has never risen above 30 percent. Possibilities or trends that could contribute to a surge in Ma's approval rate in the near future are nowhere to be seen.



In addition to changes in Ma's approval rate that reflected the people's unhappiness about Ma's performance in government, fluctuations in public trust in Ma is also an indication of the president's serious leadership crises. Figure 2 also displays Ma's public trust trends, and it is easy to see similar changes in public opinions of the president in this figure. The furor over melamine-tainted milk products and the Typhoon Morakot disaster are two important watersheds. These two incidents have not only altered the people's assessment of the government's performance, but also changed Ma's confidence index. Over the past six months, the proportion of people distrusting Ma (over 40 percent) has always been larger than that of those who trust him (less than 40 percent).

As noted before, the KMT, which controls a majority of the legislative seats, should be able to win public approval and support and turn itself into an asset to the Ma administration if it performs well. Yet poll results suggested that the KMT's one-party dominance in the Legislative Yuan has apparently become a heavy burden rather than a

help to Ma's government. Figure 3 shows disapproval ratings for KMT legislators' overall performance in the legislature have been far higher than the approval ratings - twice as much. The slogan absolute governance and full responsibility" means that Ma and the KMT have to take full responsibility for their poor performance in government over the past two years.



The Ma Administration's Leadership and Governance Crises

A look into Ma's two-year performance in government reveals that the public's high disapproval rate and high level of distrust have been fueled primarily by the Ma administration's ineffective leadership and incompetent governance. Such incompetent governance has much to do with Ma's leadership ability and style. In other words, Taiwan's greatest crises at present lie in the leadership crises. If we refuse to face or deliberately avoid the Ma factor when seeking answers to the various problems Taiwan is now facing, we will only be running in circles and will never be able to find a way out. The crux of all problems is this: Ma is a leader without leadership.

Leadership is the ability to realize visions. But Ma's key campaign promises, such as "Ma will turn the economy around right away," "the 633 goal" (which stands for 6 percent annual economic growth, per capita income of US\$30,000 and an unemployment rate lower than 3 percent), and "boosting the stock market beyond 10,000 points," have soon become bounced checks, and the people quickly saw Ma's true governance capability. Ma's performance since his presidency has exposed his lack of not only national vision but also competence in governance, and his insufficiency has

continually plunged his administration into governing crises. In fact, when Ma was the mayor of Taipei, the Taipei City Government's screws had come loose one after another. Similarly, after Ma assumed the presidency, screws of the state machine have also begun to come loose or go missing. With such a leader and his team in government, crises are no contingencies, and absurd performances have become normality.

However, what angered the people even more and what the public found unbearable is the way the Ma administration responded to questions about Ma's policies that have become bounced checks. Commenting on Ma's promise that "Ma will turn the economy around right away," one official said the slogan actually means "Ma will turn the economy around gradually." Regarding Ma's pledge to push the stock market beyond 20,000 points, another official stated that Ma "was joking" when he gave the promise. What's more, Ma, who dared not directly explain to the public when he will be able to achieve the "633 goal," chose instead to tell the foreign media during an interview that he will not be able to attain the goal until the last year of his second term in office. Bureaucratic rhetoric such as these demonstrated the administration's refusal to acknowledge mistakes and to apologize to the people; therefore, these remarks had drawn overwhelming public criticism right after they were uttered. Because of their incompetent governance and insincere apologies, government leaders have lost the people's basic trust over the past two years.

Another element that characterizes Ma's team is the anxiety for Ma's personal glamour and image. Such anxiety has rendered members in his team voiceless figures. This had been a characteristic of Ma's team in the Taipei City Government, and a similar trait is again appearing in the current central government. According to a survey published by China Times last December, after one and a half years of Ma's presidency, the majority of the general public were still fairly unfamiliar with key Cabinet members. The well-knownness of nearly 40 percent of Cabinet members was less than one percent; furthermore, as much as 52 percent of the interviewees did not know any of Ma's Cabinet members. These Cabinet members lack the backbone to take initiatives and responsibility; they only do the orders their superiors give them. This has become the basic policy-making pattern of the Ma administration. On the other hand, over the past two years, all the gaffes in words or in actions made by government officials, Ma included, have given the public a strong sense of the authorities' elitism, arrogance, and want of empathy.

Why has this supposedly experienced Cabinet team turned to be so preposterous? Over the past decade or so, Taiwan has seen great changes in politics, society, economy,

etc., both on the domestic and the international fronts. The workings of the legislature, the media environment, the complex economy, and the pluralistic society these days have presented circumstances that require a policy-making process completely different from the one adopted by KMT Cabinet members in the 1990s, when the state was dominated by the KMT party. That is why members of the public felt that numerous policies and announcements made by the Executive Yuan recently are alien to the present generation and way out of line with the current society. For instance, during the crisis management of the melamine-tainted milk products and of the Typhoon Morakot calamity, various government agencies' sluggish response, finger-pointing, flip-flop decision-making, and especially their indifferent and unfeeling attitude toward the victims have shocked and opened the eyes of the public.


Another important reason accounting for the incompetent governance of the Ma administration is the arrogance of the KMT majority government. Since the Ma administration took office, many people have been concerned that the government, backed by 58 percent of the vote won by Ma in the presidential election and by a three-fourths majority held by the KMT in the legislature, will lose effective checks and balances necessary in a democracy. They worried that there will be no room for sensible debates on significant policies and that every decision will have to be left at the mercy of the authorities-and, given the current circumstances, the authorities can make good decisions only when they remain humble, self-examining and open to advice, or are unusually gifted. Regrettably, our observation over the past two years has continually proved that Ma's administration team is not only self-willed and obstinate but also completely ignores different opinions.

Another key reason for the Ma administration's dipping trust index is that the government, when promoting policies, often keeps contents of the policies in its secretive "black box" and acts arbitrarily. For example, people have been concerned about and suspicious of the administration's push for the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China partly because the specific contents of the pact have not been made known. As a result, proponents and opponents of the agreement cannot properly express their views on the policy. But the main cause of the people's anxiety about and suspicion of the ECFA is the government's fear and evasion of the supervision of public opinions over the agreement. People are worried that they may be sacrificed during the process of negotiations between Taiwan and China. The Executive Yuan, which had repeatedly resisted submitting the ECFA for legislative review, was finally forced to accept the step because of increasing public opposition to the agreement. In other words, the Ma administration's serious inadequacy of

transparency, accountability and responsibility in pursuing policies has become the primary cause of the people's distrust in its decision-making pattern.

In fact, the decision-making process leading to the government's opening up the market to U.S. beef imports had also been marked by the lack of transparency during its negotiations with the U.S.; the Ma administration, while refusing to let the legislature oversee that decision or hold related executive agencies accountable, had irresponsibly reported only the positive aspects of the policy and not the negative sides. This is why the decision had enraged the public and why the government was subsequently forced to make an about-turn on the issue. When the Legislative Yuan passed the resolution to open up the market to U.S. beef imports in 2006, the KMT was the major driving force behind the decision. However, the law clearly states that the government has to report to a specific legislative committee before it actually opens up the market to U.S. beef imports. Yet the Executive Yuan rejected the established procedure and paid no attention to the oversight of the legislature, the highest institution representing the popular will. Less than a week after Ma assumed the KMT chairmanship, his administration announced Taiwan will open its market to U.S. beef imports. Government policies or actions like this that ignore both the popular will and the mechanism of checks and balances have intensified the public's strong disapproval with and distrust in the Ma administration.

Conclusion

In summary, Ma's ineffective leadership and his administration's incompetent governance have not only got the KMT bogged down in political predicaments, but also cast Taiwan into unprecedented national crises. The people of Taiwan have been highly uncertain and anxious about the country's diplomacy, domestic affairs, economy, defense, relationship with China, and public safety. If Ma cannot learn any lesson from the past during the remainder of his term in office, if he continues to fail the people's requests and expectations of him, if he cannot improve his governance capability, if he refuses to respect voices of opposition, and if he does not want to change his arrogant attitude in government - then his approval rate and public trust may continue to hit new lows. He may become a lame-duck president ahead of time. 

Chih-cheng Lo is President of the Taipei-based Taiwan Brain Trust.