A Lot of Sizzle but Little Steak:
Media Miss the Point of Taiwan’s Elections

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Taiwan’s 2004 presidential election; the media blitz has begun. First we see repeated footage of the election-eve assassination attempt on President Chen Shui-bian and Vice President Annette Lu of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). As Chen and Lu ride through Tainan in a red, open jeep bearing the bold #1 of their ballot position, gun shots are muffled by the cheering crowds and exploding firecrackers. Then with the blood on Chen’s jacket barely dry, independent lawmaker Sisy Chen and KMT/PFP leaders fill the airwaves with cries of “fake” and “set-up.”

Flash-forward: Chen wins the election. Losing presidential candidate Lien Chan of the Kuomintang Party (KMT) angrily tells his supporters that he will not concede. In the coming days despite a lack of any supporting evidence, Lien pours forth an ever changing list of demands. First he wants a recount, then a partial recount, then a nullification of the election; throughout he wants President Chen to declare a state of emergency, to circumvent the Control Yuan and to allow a special investigative committee on the shooting. On and on come his changing demands until finally no one is sure what he wants--except to cover up the increasing erosion of KMT support and to not admit defeat.

Flash-forward: Lien’s vice presidential candidate, James Soong of the People’s First Party (PFP) continues almost fanatically to promote the image of unrest. With his blessing, PFP members and gangsters stage a storming of the Central Election Committee Offices and later the barricades outside the Presidential Palace. Soong too refuses to accept the will of the voting populace and the probable end of his political career. A media savvy politician, Soong stakes all on promoting unrest yet disappears before his minions reach the barricades.

Flash-forward again: row upon row of wild theories continue to be dragged out to explain the alleged staging and/or faking of the assassination attempt. Finally Henry Lee, famed forensic expert from the United States comes to Taiwan and confirms: yes the shooting was real; yes Chen and Lu were really wounded by gunshots, yes the shooting came from outside the jeep.

The KMT/PFP rumors and wild speculations are blown out of the water. Undaunted and clinging desperately to the irrational hope that the shooting cost them the election, the KMT/PFP regroup and prepare a new set of rumors for the media.

Hungrely the media eat all this up and eagerly spew it out on the public

Yet, amidst all this commotion and cries for truth, the reality of what transpired has been missed. With the pre-election overplaying of polls and coverage focusing on candidates’ controversial personalities followed by post election focus on the assassination attempt,
the real issues of the election have been missed, missed by everyone except those who really count, the silent voters who speak with their ballots.

Did we miss something? Yes, we did. We, the media and all those looking for surface sensationalism missed what really took place in this election. It can be summed up in three words: economy, localization and respect. These three words are key to understanding the increased sophistication of Taiwan’s voters.

Voter sophistication? No sympathy vote? Yes, indeed Taiwan’s voters have become more sophisticated and it is the politicians, media and pundits who have a long way to go. Taiwan’s TV stations in particular created anger and suspicion in the blue camp when the stations falsely reported early returns had to be reversed to reflect the reality of Chen’s lead and subsequent victory.

“Sympathygate” theories do provide an easy bandwagon for pundits to board. Even DPP Legislators Shen Fu-hsiung ran his “lucky silver bullet” interpretation up the flagpole at the Chinese Association of Political Science’s (CAPS) post election briefing of the foreign press on March 21st. But, I didn’t buy Shen’s or the others’ theories then and I don’t buy them now. They are an insult to the voters and the history of Taiwan.

In all the discussions I have had with voters, friends and others after the election, I have yet to hear of a single person who changed his or her vote because of the assassination attempt. If anything, to my surprise I heard those who voted green in 2000 say they voted blue in 2004; and I heard others who voted blue say they would not again because of the post election brouhaha and whining.

What then really transpired behind the scenes? In the 2000 presidential elections, Chen gathered 39.3% of the vote while Lien (23.10%) and Soong (36.84%) combined for approximately 60%. Simple mathematics would then predict that if Lien and Soong would team up four years later, they would win in a walk.

Politics however is not a simple mathematical equation. Process, change, growth or stagnation is its norm. In 2004 Chen got 50.1% and Lien and Soong got 49.9%. So what caused this massive KMT/PFP erosion?

The economy plays a big part in any election and in Taiwan’s 2004 elections, the economy favored the KMT/PFP. For four years Taiwan’s economy has not performed well; unemployment has been high. However, the world’s economy has also sagged during that period. Early this year, Taiwan’s economy began to pick up; clearly the country had not gone down the tubes as many had predicted it would when the DPP took over in 2000.

In 2000, the KMT still clung to claiming credit for the Taiwan Miracle and a reputation for being more skilled in economic development than the DPP. Nevertheless the KMT/PFP chose not to emphasize the economy in 2004, mounting instead a “hate Chen” campaign. From 2000 to 2004, the KMT/PFP dominated legislature became a “do
nothing” legislature focusing more on embarrassing the ruling DPP administration than on taking actions that the country needed. Would the voters be sophisticated enough to factor all this in?

The economy is an important issue but not the only issue. My business friends tend to support the pan-blues. With their minds on profit, they are fond of quoting to me; “It is better to be a live dog, than a dead lion.” They refer to maintaining trade with China at any cost. I counter that if one is a lion instead of a dog, perhaps “To be a lion who lives like a dog may be worse than a risk-taking lion.”

When many hear “localization,” they think of independence. I am sure that for many deep green and many deep blue voters that is exactly what it means. For many others, however, localization does not automatically translate into independence; they are sophisticated enough to live with the ambiguities that the status quo demands.

One thing that localization does mean however is a control over Taiwan’s destiny and the respect, which that requires and brings. This is a respect that people will die for; and this is why localization will long-term take priority over economy in elections.

Four years ago, both local and foreign media reports were filled with foreboding. If Chen were elected president, he would declare independence and war would ensue. Four years have passed and nothing like that has happened. Taiwan has however become more conscious of its identity and that it must control its destiny.

Now, we hear new warnings from the foreign media. They hope Chen will continue to refrain from rocking the boat by swallowing its respect and even compromising its citizens’ health. When the SARS epidemic was at its peak, Taiwan’s 23 million people were denied access to active participation in the World Health Organization because China blocked them.

Are Taiwan’s voters not sophisticated enough to parlay all this and to see what is going on in the world? Foreign media have stressed the fact that this is only Taiwan’s third real presidential election. Unable to imagine voter sophistication and maturity so soon, the foreign media remains ignorant of how the roots and consciousness of Taiwan’s localization trace back to 1895 and even earlier. After the treaty of Shimonoseki, when Taiwan found itself traded like a pawn to the Japanese by the Manchu Qing government, Taiwan’s diverse Hakka, feuding Fukien settlers and aborigines began to realize their destiny had to be in their own united hands. Under 50 years of Japanese rule, they petitioned, struggled and won the right to elect their own Senators and representatives to the Japanese Imperial Diet. They were already well versed in the traditions and practices of democratic government long before the KMT came to Taiwan.

This consciousness and participation had to go underground when the KMT killed off many of Taiwan’s intelligentsia in the 2-28 massacre and the subsequent years of white terror. But these leaders had children and their children had children. Though these
inheritors of the democratic tradition had to read their books and share their ideas clandestinely, they kept alive and passed on these political goals and ideals.

Some writers and even KMT politicians criticize Taiwanese voters’ lack of sophistication because so many come from rural families. How can farmers be savvy and sophisticated? Certainly farmers clothing may not be the latest in fashion. However, a look at the political muscle of America’s farm belt and the role of the Iowa primary in the US elections dispels any notion that farmers are not aware of the values that drive their country—or that farmers could be expected to throw away their votes out of sympathy when they have many more pressing social issues and concerns.

Were Taiwan’s voters easily swayed? Not on your life! They are more in touch with the values of their country and what is going on than the media and even their own politicians give them credit for. Look instead at why the KMT support eroded; it is déjà vu all over again for them. The 2004 presidential elections are the first tolling of this bell; the December Legislative Elections will be the next.

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This is # 6 in a series of comments and observations on the 2004 Taiwan Presidential Elections. Future articles include “A Look at Sisy Chen and Hsu Hsin-liang,” “A Tale of Four Parties,” “The Dark Side of Confucianism” and eventually “A Pro-offered Solution to the Two China Issue.” Readers can share these comments with friends and interested parties. Copyright: Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.

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