

Public Approval Ratings and the Nov. 29 Local Elections

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Public approval of the president, the premier and the cabinet has hit an all-time low just a month ahead of island-wide municipal and county elections, according to the latest opinion poll by Taiwan Brain Trust (TBT). The government's flagging popularity is expected to affect the election prospects of candidates for the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) when voters across Taiwan go to the poll on Nov. 29.

Low approval rates for Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou has become the norm, but his public support has now slipped to just 17.3 percent, the lowest number ever measured since TBT began to track approval rates in its bimonthly opinion surveys. This shows that citizens continue to question Ma's ability to rule the country. Furthermore, the approval rate of Premier Jiang Yi-huah is even lower than that of the president, hitting a record low of 15.8 percent. In a race to the bottom, the cabinet's public approval rate stands at a still lower 15.5 percent. Given such dismal public support for the nation's leadership, how can Taiwan expect to compete internationally?

Since taking office as premier in February last year, Jiang has effected frequent personnel changes – so far 22 cabinet members tendered their resignation, or were replaced. Yet, instead of boosting Jiang's approval ratings, these reshuffles created the impression that the cabinet is already at its wit's end. In our neighboring countries Japan and South Korea the premier is usually replaced when his approval ratings fall below 20

percent, in a bid to rekindle new expectation. In this latest poll, more than half of respondents (56.7 percent) believe that Jiang should step down. It seems a growing number of citizens are no longer willing to give Jiang another chance. It should not come as a surprise that pan-green supporters are much more critical of the premier than pan-blue voters. However, even among the pan-blue camp 38.9 percent of respondents want Jiang to quit as premier. The Ma government cannot ignore that the premier is unpopular with its own supporters.

The poll also registered marked ups and downs in satisfaction with the performance of the two major political parties. Dissatisfaction with the KMT grew to 72 percent, up 2.8 percentage points from the previous poll in August, while satisfaction with the ruling party declined 6.4 percentage points (23.6% → 17.2%). In contrast, dissatisfaction with the major opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) declined by 6.1 percentage points (55.6% → 49.5%) during the same period, whereas satisfaction with the DPP rose by 2.9 percentage points (27.3% → 30.2%).

Asked to pick their favorite from among four political parties (KMT, DPP, Taiwan Solidarity Union, New People Party), only 16.7 percent of respondents picked the KMT, 7.8 percentage points less than in August. At the same time the ratio of those who most dislike the KMT has increased by 6.2 percentage points (31.7% → 37.9%), while those who are undecided increased by 2.5 percentage points

(23.8% → 26.3%). This shows that around 10 percent of citizens are currently turning away from the KMT. In contrast, the electorate is becoming more accepting of the DPP. While the DPP only slightly improved its “most liked” party status from 23.4 percent to 24.5 percent, there was a marked 6.8 percentage point drop (19.2% → 12.4%) in people who most dislike the DPP. A comparison with the previous three polls shows that for the first time in more than half a year the DPP has overtaken the KMT as the most liked party (24.5% vs. 16.7%), taking a lead of 7.8 percent points. This shows that the DPP’s efforts have been met with the electorate’s approval.

As for the upcoming municipal and county elections, support for KMT candidates has shrunk by 5.1 percentage points to 16.8 percent. At the same time, 43.9 percent of respondents did not voice an opinion, up 4.5 percentage points. Most likely, many of these undecided voters originally supported the KMT. On the other hand, support for DPP candidates increased by 4.8 percentage points to 34.3 percent. Generally speaking, the KMT’s election prospects seem to worsen.

Nevertheless, the upcoming elections are local ones, and by their nature should focus on balancing local interests and providing services to citizens. Political parties or the blue-green political divide should not play a dominant role. Instead, the ability, character and strengths of the candidates should serve as reference points. In Japan, for instance, the vast majority of local government leaders are not members of a political party. Yet, in Taiwan, political party affiliation is emphasized also on the local government level ranging from town assemblies to county magistrates and city mayors. In its voting behavior, the Taiwanese electorate usually

is caught in the blue-green political polarization. Voters also strongly care about whether a candidate hails from their constituency. As a result, blue-green confrontation or competition among local factions overshadows local election campaigns, obstructing overall constructive development. Taiwan’s electorate and political parties should give this some serious thought. **BT**

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