

## Subtle Shifts in Administration and Party Approval Ratings

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The approval ratings of President Ma Ying-jeou and the cabinet move in opposite directions as media attention turns away from the administration to the 2016 elections and other issues, the latest Taiwan Brain Trust (TBT) opinion survey conducted in March shows.

Ma's approval ratings continued a tepid rebound and reached a four-month high, rising from 14.2% in December to 18.3% in January and 19.1% in March. Disapproval of the president's performance continued to fall from 76.2% in December and 75.1% in January to 73.1% in March. The slight rebound in Ma's popularity is not surprising since the electorate has low expectations of the outgoing president so that he is given a pass as long as he creates no problems. Criticism of the president has also abated correspondingly. Since Ma cannot run for office, the main opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has shifted its attention to the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections after its landslide victory in local elections in November 2014. The president has effectively exited the center stage.

It deserves our attention that people in the 40-60 age brackets with junior or senior high school education are most disenchanting with the president. However, approval and disapproval starkly differ depending on partisan leaning. Among pan-Green voters, 94.5% disapprove of Ma's performance, whereas in the pan-Blue camp only 50.0% feels that way and 43.8% expresses approval. This shows that political attitudes and allegiances still divide opinion about the president.

Public approval of Premier Mao Chi-kuo's

performance has slightly increased from 17.9% in January to 19.1% in March but this change is still within the margin of error. The likely reason is also low expectations. At the same time, disapproval of Mao's performance has also gone up 3.5 percentage points from 43.8% in January to 47.3% in March. This shows that the electorate is quite demanding of the premier because the Executive Yuan's functions are closely related to people's work and livelihood. It is quite interesting that as many as one third of survey respondents did not voice an opinion, probably because they were unfamiliar with Mao.

On the other hand, approval of the cabinet's performance declined from 21.1% in January to 19.4% in March, while disapproval rose 3 percentage points from 62.0% to 65.0% during the same period, most likely for the same reasons that caused the premier's approval ratings to fall. The key is that approval stands below 20 percent for the entire government – president, premier and cabinet, and disapproval registers at 73.1% for the president and 65.0% for the premier. It follows that 73.2% of the public believes that the DPP will likely regain power in 2016.

As for political parties, the approval rating of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) continued to increase from 11.0% in December and 16.7% in January to 18.3% in March. At the same time, disapproval with the KMT continued to fall from 80.0% to 74.9% during the same period. While this seems to indicate that the KMT has begun to recover from its defeat in the local elections,

the change in approval/disapproval is still within the margin of error. However, the figures for pan-Blue supporters seem to indicate that the KMT is winning back its traditional voter base. Within the pan-Blue camp, approval of the KMT's performance has risen from 24.4% in December and 37.0% in January to 38.4% in March. The increase was probably less pronounced in March because the corruption scandal in KMT-held Changhua County put a damper on pro-KMT sentiment.

On the other hand, disapproval of the DPP's performance increased markedly from 35.4% in December and 43.1% in January to 51.4% in March. Approval fell correspondingly during the same period from 46.3% to 37.8%. This decline in popularity is apparently related to the scandals over some local council speaker elections at the end of 2014. More recently, rifts have emerged within the DPP as party members fiercely compete to win nominations for the 2016 legislative elections. As a result, approval of the DPP within the pan-Green camp declined markedly from 67.4% in January to 54.8% in March. The DPP should take this apparent shift from high expectations to disappointment among its sympathizers as a warning sign.

Party preference remains largely unchanged. However, the share of those who most favor the DPP declined from 33.9% in January to 25.7% in March. At the same time, the share of those who do not favor any particular political party increased from 15.9% to 21.1% during the same period. Although the DPP remains the most popular party, clearly a shift in public opinion is under way that translates into heightened expectations toward third force political forces. In the eyes of more than 40 percent of the public,

the KMT is still the most unpopular party. However, while 45.5% identified the KMT as the least liked party in January, that figure fell to 41.7% in March. In contrast, the share of those who least favored the DPP climbed from 15.6% to 16.9% during the same period. Obviously, the DPP has not shown its best recently, while the KMT has been able to prevent further erosion of public support.

The popularity of the other political parties with seats in the legislature remains more or less unchanged. Interestingly, 7.0% of the public named the People First Party (PFP), which belongs to the Blue camp, as most favored party, whereas DPP ally Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) was chosen by only 4.0% in the March poll. Similarly, the TSU was least favored by 11.7%, whereas only 5.3% said the same of the PFP. These differences in popularity might indicate their performance in the upcoming legislative elections. With the relative strengths of the PFP and TSU in flux and Third Force candidates in the running, the 2016 parliamentary elections could see dramatic developments. 

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