

**MA YING-JEOU'S POLITICAL STORM
IN THE AFTERMATH OF
TYPHOON MORAKOT**

OU-YANG Hsin-yi & BO Zhiyue

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Executive Summary

1. Typhoon Morakot hit Taiwan on 7 August 2009 with a torrential downpour of 2.7 meters in three days, a historical record in 200 years. By 24 August 2009, the heavy rain had killed 292 people, injured 45, and left 385 or more missing.
2. During this crisis, President Ma Ying-jeou (马英九) and his government proved to be inept. Ma was too slow to respond to the crisis, and his government issued conflicting messages within the critical 72 hours of the natural disaster.
3. Andrew Hsia (夏立言), vice foreign minister of Taiwan, twice declined international assistance for the relief efforts. Ma later corrected him by saying that Taiwan never rejected foreign aid.
4. Taiwan urgently needed helicopters for rescue efforts, but it hesitated to approach the Mainland out of political sensitivity. Ma's government was equally ambivalent toward the assistance from the American and Japanese militaries.
5. Taiwan's divisive politics did not help either. Some blue-camp leaders had complaints, and green-camp politicians did nothing but finger-pointing.
6. In the face of the crisis, the media on the island also failed to rally the people around the leadership of Ma Ying-jeou. Instead, commentators were almost universally negative about the government's rescue efforts.
7. A silver-lining in the mist lies in the civil society. NGOs, civil organizations, religious groups, enterprises, and individuals all sprang into action and went to the disaster-hit areas to help with rescue and relief efforts.
8. The natural disaster is over, but Ma has been embroiled in a political storm as a result. The most recent poll conducted in Taiwan shows that Ma is at the

lowest point of his approval ratings since May 2008. And more than 80 percent of the respondents to a CNN's poll believe that Ma should step down.

9. Ma apologized at least three times in response to criticisms and dismissed Andrew Hsia for his dereliction of duties. He pledged to improve the government's efficiency in future rescue efforts, punish incompetent officials, and reconstitute institutions and mechanisms for crisis management.
10. However, Ma still refuses to admit that his government has erred in the handling of the crisis. To him, his government adopted appropriate measures after Typhoon Morakot unraveled the island.
11. It is unlikely that Ma would step down as a result of his ineffective crisis management because it was a natural disaster and there were other officials to share the blame. But the KMT might suffer in the forthcoming local elections.
12. Most importantly, Ma would have to focus more on local affairs in Taiwan, instead of relations with the Mainland.

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Taiwan's Morakot: Ma Ying-Jeou's Katrina?

- 1.1 On 7 August 2009, Taiwan was hit by Typhoon Morakot (See Appendix 1). The typhoon wrought Taiwan for three days. Although its wind speed was measured as mid-scaled range, the heavy rainfall in three days accumulated to a water level of 2,686 millimeters, a record high in 200 years.
- 1.2 The torrential downpour caused the collapse of 29 bridges¹ and 74 roads;² civil property damage is estimated at NT\$13 billion (US\$395 million), agricultural damage NT\$ 9.8 billion (US\$295 million), and fishery damage NT\$ 4.1 billion (US\$125 million).³ Total financial losses are estimated to be the highest in 19 years.⁴

* Dr Ou-yang Hsin-yi is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore and Associate Professor and Chair of the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Cultural University in Taiwan and Dr Bo Zhiyue is Senior Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. The authors would like to thank Professor John Wong for having gone through several drafts of this paper patiently and provided a lot of very useful comments. They would also like to thank Professor Zheng Yongnian for his helpful comments.

¹ 中华民国交通部运输研究所, http://bobe.thb.gov.tw/BridgeBed_List.aspx. cited on 19 August 2009

² 中华民国公路总局灾害应变中心, <http://168.motc.gov.tw/GIPSite/wSite/ct?xItem=30280&ctNode=1425&mp=1>, cited on 19 August 2009

³ 中华民国行政院农业委员会, <http://udn.com/NEWS/NATIONAL/BREAKINGNEWS1/5085635.shtml>, cited on 19 August 2009.

⁴ According to a report from United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the total financial losses caused by Morakot in Taiwan could be NT\$ 110 billion (US\$ 3.4 billion). “联合国公布第一号莫拉克台风情势报告”, (*United Daily News*, 20 August 2009) <http://udn.com/NEWS/NATIONAL/BREAKINGNEWS1/5089937.shtml>

- 1.3 However, the most severe loss is that of human lives. The mudflows destroyed at least 12 waterside villages (Appendix 2). According to the latest statistics from the Central Disaster Response Centre (中央灾害应变中心), by 24 August, the heavy rain had killed 292 people, injured 45 and left 385 missing. Among those villages affected, the worst was Hsiaolin village (Kaoshiung county), where the whole village was flushed out by the mudslide, and 400 or more lives are believed buried.⁵
- 1.4 Politically, Ma Ying-jeou has lost a major opportunity in earning credibility as a strong leader. The responses of his government to the crisis were too slow, too inadequate, and often too confusing. Most key leaders were attending to personal affairs when the heavy rain was claiming lives and properties. Meanwhile, the government was sending conflicting messages about international assistance.
- 1.5 Consequently, Ma was under heavy criticisms from the media within Taiwan and without. Netizens asked him to step down, and his approving ratings took a nosedive. However, he is likely to survive the political storm, even though the KMT's chances of winning in the forthcoming local elections are likely to diminish. Ma is likely to pay more attention to local affairs in the future rather than cross-strait relations.

Inept Leadership

- 2.1 From 7 August to 9 August, when the typhoon was accelerating its wind speed and rainfall, most of Ma Ying-jeou's administrative team, including Vice President Vincent C. Siew (Hsiao Wan-chang)(萧万长 who was sick at home), Premier Liu Chao-shiuan (刘兆玄), Vice Premier Chiu Cheng-hsung (邱正

⁵ The government's figure has been altered daily. Different sources produce different figures. According to the latest statistics from the Central Disaster Response Centre, as of 20 August, the missing toll increased from 60 to 440. The jump was because Kaoshiung county revised its figures on 18 August, and on 19 again. However, an estimation by a branch of United Nations on 19 August put the missing number at 523.

雄), and cabinet secretary Hsueh Hsiang-chuan (薛香川)⁶ (the latter three were called the “Big Three” of Executive Yuan, 行政院「三长」) were all not available for supervising the rescue work.

- 2.2 Liu was having a hair-cut and Hsueh was having dinner with his father-in-law. Ma himself went to attend a wedding ceremony. On 15 August when the disaster was deteriorating, Ma went to host a baseball game opening ceremony, instead of directing the rescue work. It is commented that the Ma team was far too slow in responding to the crisis.
- 2.3 Ma’s government was ill prepared when it came to policy responses to the crisis. In the early stages when foreign aid was badly needed, Andrew Hsia (夏立言)⁷, Vice Foreign Minister of Taiwan, twice declined international assistance for the relief efforts. Ma later corrected him by saying that Taiwan never rejected foreign aid.
- 2.4 At that time, Taiwan urgently needed helicopters for rescue efforts, especially those that could lift heavy bulldozers and excavators. China happened to have a helicopter model Me-26 with 20-ton lifting power. China had offered the model but Ma hesitated to accept assistance from the Mainland out of political sensitivity. Ma’s government was equally ambivalent toward the assistance from the American and Japanese militaries.⁸
- 2.5 Taiwan’s military was not prepared to deal with the crisis.⁹ The armed forces, for instance, did not know how to handle foreign aid. According to one report, when the U.S. air force carrier C-130 sent packs of water-proof plastic clothes to an air base in Tainan, Taiwanese military delivered them wrongly to Kaoshiung where the goods were not needed. The goods were sent back to

⁶ Hsueh submitted his resignation on 19 August.

⁷ Hsia submitted his resignation on 18 August.

⁸ U.S. Navy’s Super Sea Stallion helicopter has a 15-ton lifting capacity.

⁹ The performance of Taiwan’s armed forces during this crisis is in sharp contrast to that of the People’s Liberation Army in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake.

Tainan base with the absurd excuse of “having no idea what these water-proof plastic clothes were for”!

Divided Politics

- 3.1 In the face of the crisis, Taiwan’s politics remains divided. Green-camp politicians were busy finger-pointing. The DPP (民进党) openly asked the President to apologize and demanded for the removal of Premier Liu and five other cabinet ministers, specifically the Minister of National Defense Chen Chao-min (陈肇敏).¹⁰
- 3.2 The Chairperson of DPP Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) criticized Ma’s administration severely in a news conference for “the dysfunction of the chain of command. Authority is totally obsolete if a government’s information relies on TV station to such a degree”. The DPP spokesman Cheng Wen-tsang (郑文灿) said: “A government is redundant if its messages of disaster came mostly from audiences call-in at TV stations.”¹¹
- 3.3 Former President Chen Shui-bien, who is in jail due to several money laundering charges, also did not miss the opportunity to offer his criticisms of Ma, saying that Ma’s administrative capability of relieving victims of disaster is “inferior to Wen Jia-bao’s”.¹²
- 3.4 Ironically enough, when the KMT questioned the whereabouts of Kaoshiung County Mayor Yang Chiu-hsing (杨秋兴, DPP) who was out of the country during the typhoon raid, DPP spokesman Cheng replied “it is not the matter to

¹⁰ “蓝绿口径一致 点名马刘负责” (自由时报 08/18/2009); Minister Chen submitted his resignation on 19 August. <http://zhgpl.com/doc/1010/4/6/7/101046796.html?coluid=142&kindid=0&doid=101046796&mdate=0813142215>

¹¹ “莫拉克重创南台民进党痛批救灾不力” <http://news.sina.com.tw/article/20090809/2012505.html>

¹² “陈水扁狱中批马：救灾能力不如温家宝[视频]” http://news.ifeng.com/taiwan/1/200908/0814_351_1302387.shtml

accuse Mayor Yang's unavailability. After all, rescuing the victim is the first priority for the KMT to do".¹³

Negative Media

- 4.1 Taiwan's media has regarded itself as "the fourth power" in Taiwan's polity since Taiwan's martial law was lifted in 1988. Hence to criticize government becomes a decree and a fashionable behavior in Taiwan media's milieu. However, unlike other democratic experiences, when the country experiences a disastrous event such as 9/11 in the U.S. or earth quake in Japan, the media usually voluntarily plays an important role in rallying the people around the leadership to overcome the calamity.
- 4.2 In the face of the crisis, the media on the island did not follow the convention of orthodox democracy to rally the people around the leadership of Ma Ying-jeou. Instead, TV and newspaper commentators were almost universally negative about the government's rescue efforts. Hu Chung-hsin (胡忠信), a well known journalist in Taiwan, pointed out that "Ma is facing an unprecedented political crisis because all the media in Taiwan indiscriminately regarded Ma as the sole target to blame for his ineffective leadership".¹⁴
- 4.3 Personal appraisal instead of policy review is the thematic focus of this event. Some piercing questions raised from the Presidential news conference¹⁵ directed at Ma Ying-jeou on 18 August are, "Don't you think you have any fault in this event?" and "What were you doing on 7 and 8 August?"¹⁶

¹³ "蓝绿口径一致 点名马刘负责" (自由时报 08/18/2009)

¹⁴ "胡忠信：莫拉克引发的政治风暴正在形成" (凤凰卫视) <http://real.v.ifeng.com/vplay/ifeng/20090817/94991.shtml>

¹⁵ "总统救灾不力 媒体发问 高度批判" <http://news.pchome.com.tw/politics/tvbs/20090818/index-12505836708687739001.html>

¹⁶ Presidential News Conference (TVBS 18 August) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkimOm6tigU>

- 4.4 The international media did not look kindly to Ma's performance either. For example, CNN and other international news agencies such as United Press and L'Agence France-Presse repeatedly reported the incompetence, slowness of the rescue efforts, and the snowballing of anger of the victims. A headline of the *New York Times* on 13 August is, "Taiwan President Is Target of Anger after Typhoon".¹⁷

Civil Society Rises to the Occasion

- 5.1 In contrast to the ineffectiveness of the Ma administration, the promptness of Taiwan's civil society in responding to the crisis was impressive. NGOs, civil organizations, religious groups, enterprises, and individuals all sprang into action and went to the disaster-hit areas to help with rescue and relief efforts.
- 5.2 The world known Buddhist group Tzu Chi (慈济) was the first team to reach the sites of the disaster. Within the first 72 hours, Tzu Chi had gathered more than 15,000 volunteers headed for 21 disaster areas (in Kaoshiung alone) and provided more than 200,000 free meals to the victims.
- 5.3 Furthermore, in the first three days, Tzu Chi had distributed NT\$5000 to NT\$10,000 each to more than 12,000 victim households.¹⁸ Tzu Chi also delivered blankets and sanitation materials and comforted families of victims. Fo-kuang-shan (佛光山), another Buddhist group in Taiwan, made the first money donation to the government on 9 August.¹⁹

¹⁷ "Taiwan President Is Target of Anger After Typhoon" (*New York Times*, 12 August 2009); "马政府救灾不力外国媒体也摇头" http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=1031502&lang=tc_news&cate_img=257.jpg&cate_rss=news_PD; "救灾不力 国际媒体同声批马" <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2009/new/aug/16/today-fo9-3.htm>

¹⁸ "八八水灾 / 逾 15000 志工慈济救灾走在最前、做到最后" (2009/08/11 18:17), <http://www.nownews.com/2009/08/11/11478-2490435.htm>

¹⁹ "莫拉克风灾赈济 首笔民间捐款佛光会爱心不落人后", http://www.peopledailynews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=460&Itemid=189

- 5.4 By 11 August (the fourth day of the disaster) enterprises had raised more than NT\$200 million dollars (US\$6 million).²⁰ Money donation raised by Red-Cross and other institutions was approaching NT\$100 million dollars (US\$3 million)²¹ on 15 August. China and overseas donations were not included.²²
- 5.5 Still the most touching story is from ordinary citizens. “How much did you donate” became a daily greeting while pledges of one-day salary and a long list of student volunteers and holiday volunteers from Taipei city drive to help clean up disaster area were very common in Taiwan during these days. Even actors such as Jet Li (李连杰) help in the raising of money in Taiwan.²³

The Aftermath: the Political Fall-out and Local Election

- 6.1 By 20 August, the natural disaster had been over but not without political repercussions. The most recent polls conducted in Taiwan show that Ma is at the lowest point of his approval ratings since May 2008. One poll shows that less than a quarter (22.9%) of the total population was satisfied with Ma’s political performance after Morakot, while two-thirds (64.8%) of the population were unsatisfied with his performance (Figure 1); another poll shows that only 29% of total population was satisfied with Ma’s political performance, a sharp contrast to 66% on May 2008 when he was inaugurated as the President (Figure 2). The Premier fared even worse. Liu got only 20% of approval rate versus his relatively high rate of 43% in 2008 (Figure 3).

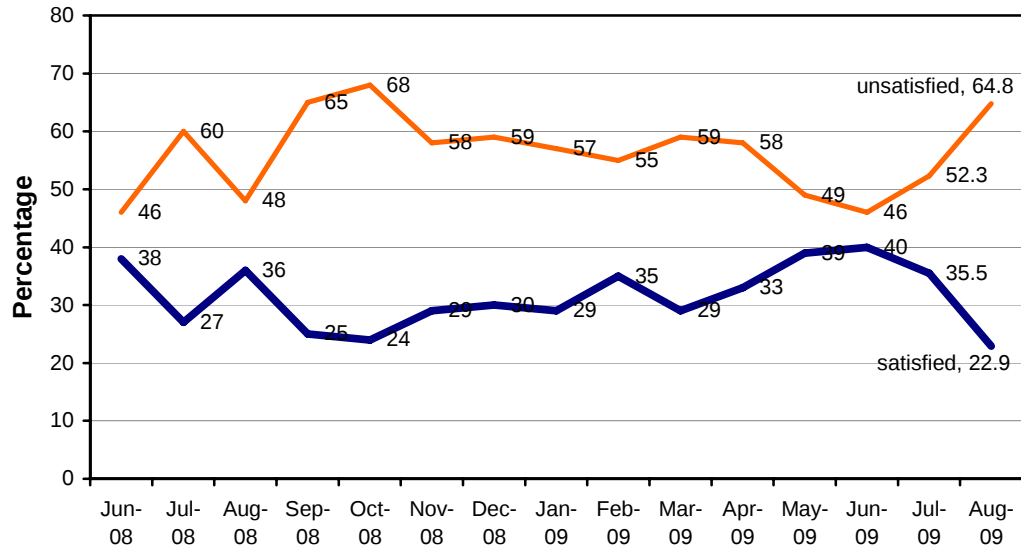
²⁰ “企业捐款已逾 20 亿”, <http://n.yam.com/tlt/fn/200908/20090812376573.html>

²¹ “内政部目前「赈灾专户」捐款已累积近 10 亿元”, <http://news.msn.com.tw/news/1381361.aspx>

²² “中国红十字会为台湾‘莫拉克’台风受灾地区再次捐款 685 万元人民币” <http://www.finet.hk/mainsite/newscenter/PRNCN/0/20090818023037e03d1bpxprbgs.html>

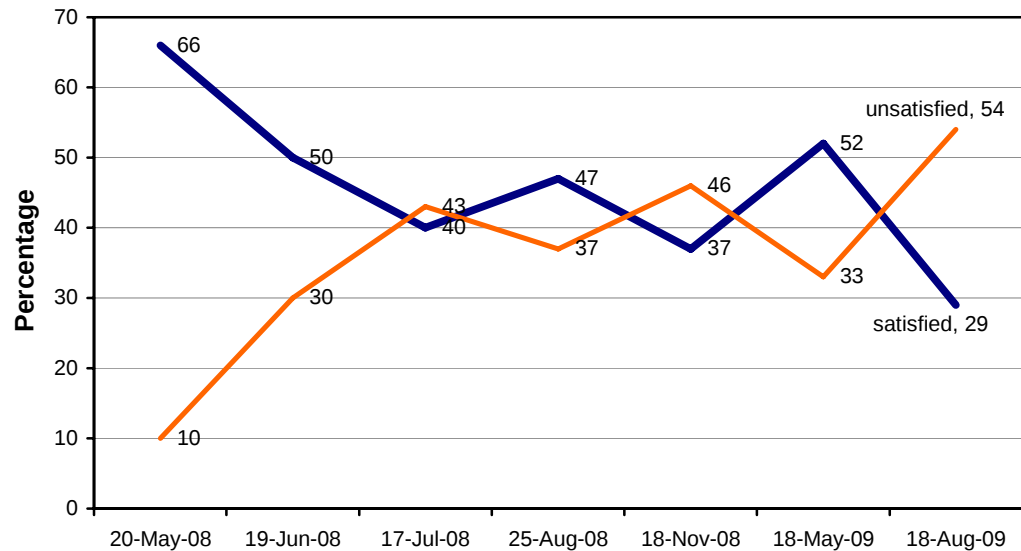
²³ “含泪搬物资 李连杰灾区输暖” <http://news.chinatimes.com/2007Cti/2007Cti-News/2007Cti-News-Content/0,4521,11050102+112009081600085,00.html>

FIGURE 1 MA YING-JEOU'S APPROVAL RATINGS

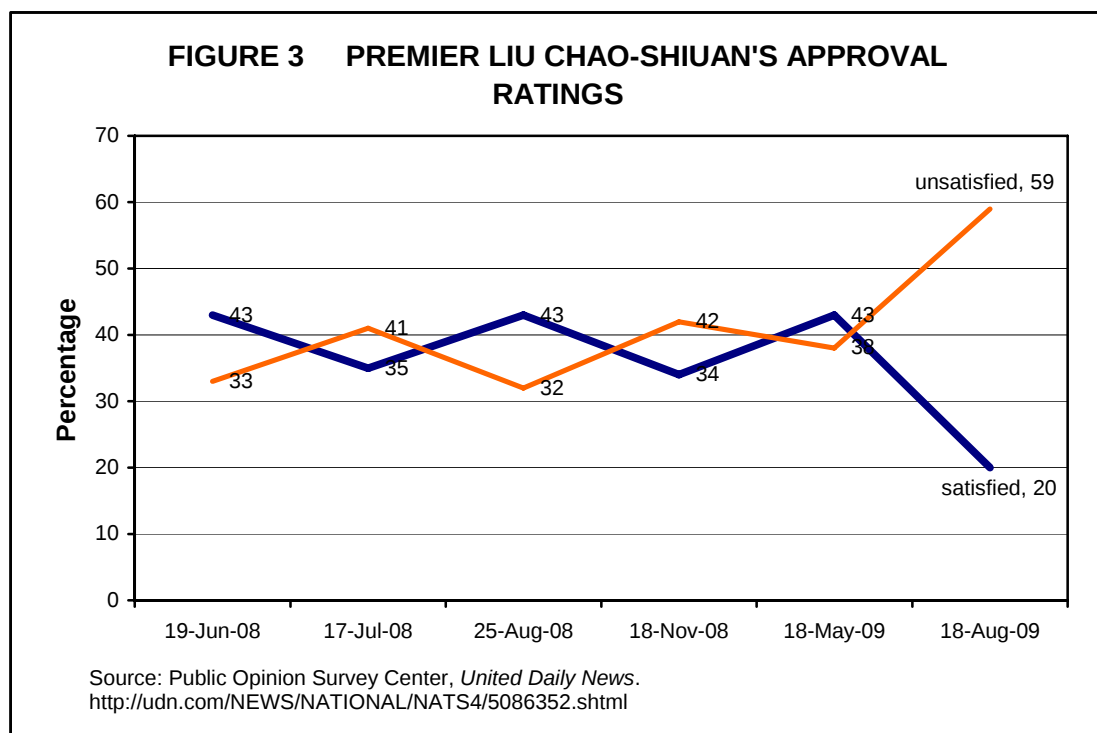


Source: Public Opinion Survey Center, Global View (远见杂志),
http://www.gvm.com.tw/gvsrc/200908_GVSRG_others.pdf

FIGURE 2 MA YING-JEOU'S APPROVAL RATINGS



Source: Public Opinion Survey Center, United Daily News.
<http://udn.com/NEWS/NATIONAL/NATS4/5086352.shtml>



6.2 The CNN polls results, in particular, captured media attention. Even though the validity of CNN's internet poll has been questioned by some scholars as not being scientifically conducted,²⁴ the Ma regime is still alarmed by the exceptionally high percentage (82 percent) of respondents who believe that Ma should step down.²⁵ The question CNN addressed to netizens on 16 August is, "Should Taiwan's leader step down over delays in aiding typhoon victims?" The number of the respondents hit 14,000 in only one day. Even pro-KMT scholars admitted that "this is an important climate of public opinion".

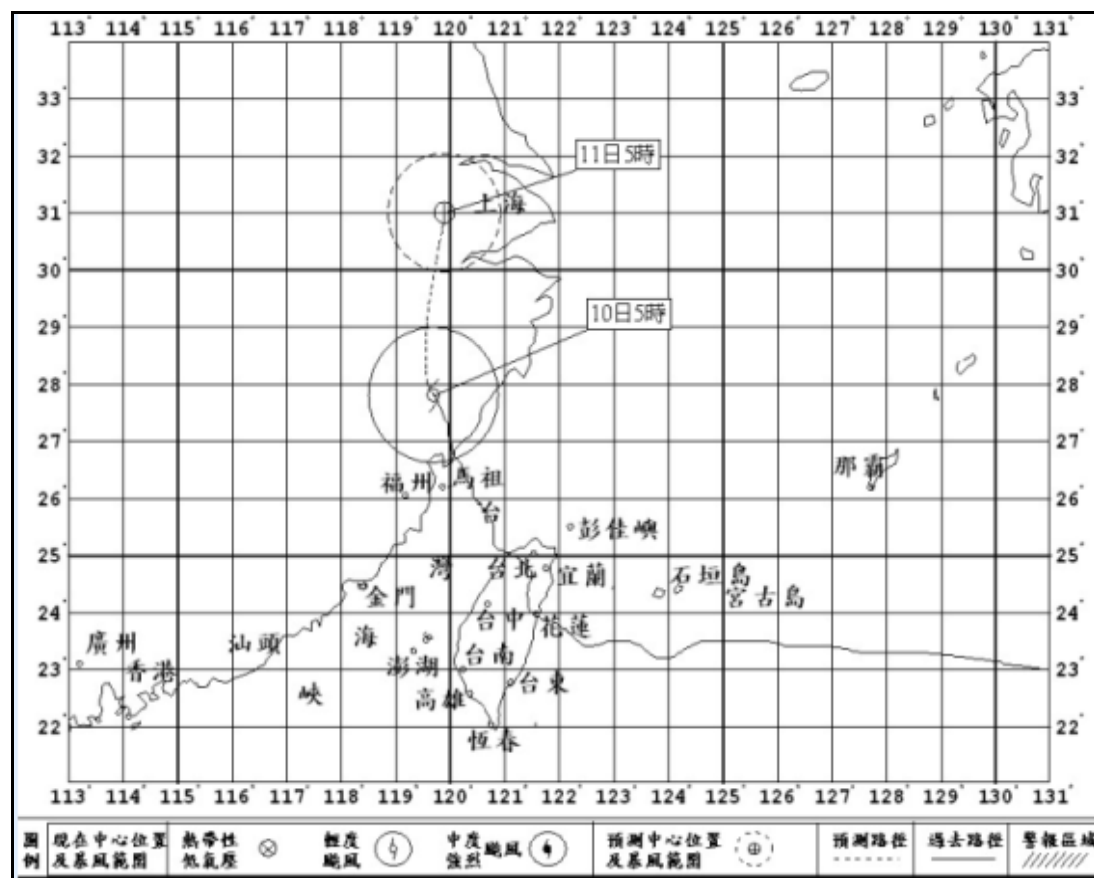
6.3 Ma bowed and apologized at least three times in response to this low approval rate and mass media's negative criticisms. He pledged to improve government's efficiency in future rescue efforts, punish incompetent officials, and reconstitute institutions and mechanisms for future crises.

²⁴ "88 水灾/CNN 民调呛马下台学者：样本不具代表性" (中央日报网络版, 2009-8-18) http://www.cdnews.com.tw/cdnews_site/docDetail.jsp?coluid=108&docid=100874435

²⁵ "民怨冲天 CNN 民调 82%呛马下台" (自由时报, 2009-8-18) <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2009/new/aug/18/today-t1.htm>

- 6.4 After the Presidential news conference of 19 August, two more cabinet members, Chen Chao-min (陈肇敏, Ministry of National Defense) and Hsueh Hsiang-chuan (薛香川, Cabinet Secretary), submitted their resignations on 20 August.
- 6.5 It is unlikely that Ma would step down as a result of his inept crisis management because it was a natural disaster (record high heavy rain) and there were other officials (three cabinet members already submitted their resignations) to share the blame. But the KMT might suffer in the forthcoming local elections. Of course, the KMT could not easily win in the county mayor election in the green-camp dominated southern Taiwan in the first place. However, even if it had had slight chances of doing so, Ma has wiped them out.
- 6.6 Most significantly, Ma will be forced to shift his attention from cross-strait relations (an area of “high politics”) to local affairs (an area of “low politics”). Ultimately, local affairs in Taiwan are more important than improving relationship with the Mainland for the political future of Ma Ying-jeou and the KMT.

APPENDIX 1 THE PATH OF TYPHOON MORAKOT (No. 0908)



註：路徑圖上所標示的時間為該日台灣標準時間TST(GMT +08:00)，每個標示點間隔為6小時

Source: Taiwan Central Weather Bureau,
http://rdc28.cwb.gov.tw/data.php?num=2009080804&year=2009&c_name=%B2%F6%A9%D4%A7J&e_name=MORAKOT

APPENDIX 2 MAJOR DISASTER AREAS RAVAGED BY MORAKOT



Source: United Daily News (聯合報), 15 August 2009
http://mag.udn.com/mag/news/storypage.jsp?f_ART_ID=207761