

**EXPLAINING TAIWAN PRESIDENT
MA YING-JEOU'S LOW POPULARITY**

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Executive Summary

1. According to various polls, Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou's popularity has been low since he took office in May 2008 and has deteriorated in his second term. His predecessor Chen Shui-bian did slightly better in his first term, but fared dismally as well in his second term.
2. While Chen and his family were implicated in scandals during his second term, Ma is generally seen as clean. Yet, both did not do well in the polls. The Taiwanese people thus tend to view their leaders quite negatively.
3. In his study on presidential popularity, John Mueller argued that presidential approval ratings would naturally dip since a policy made by the president may benefit some and alienate others. The more policies the president introduces, the more people he or she alienates, and the lower his or her approval rating.
4. The trend may be halted or even reversed when a significant event takes place, bringing about a rally-round-the-flag effect; however it would decline again once the effect fades away.
5. For Ma, his dip in popularity may be related to the economic downturn, his administration's mishandling of rescue efforts, his misreading of public anger over the imports of American beef, his personal leadership style, etc.
6. Ma's low approval ratings are not unique. Though not necessarily as low as Ma's, the popularity of other politicians is still a lot lower than their counterparts in other democratic societies. The question is whether there are broader inherent problems that have rendered high popularity difficult.
7. One reason cited is cultural. In a Confucian society like Taiwan, the idea of an enlightened ruler (明君) may have unreasonably heightened the expectation of the role and capability of political leaders.

8. Another reason is the division in Taiwan's society along the lines of national identity. Since this is a highly emotional issue, it is difficult for any leader to cultivate the support from the other side of the political spectrum. It means that his or her popularity would be relatively low from the outset.
9. Such a division not only hurts the leader's efforts to win the support of the majority of the populace, but also causes problems for governance, particularly in policy areas related to China, thereby undermining Taiwan's development and the president's popularity.
10. In addition, Taiwanese democracy functions very much like a presidential system although in accordance with the Constitution, the president's power is limited. It may thus lead to confusion with regard to the accountability of the highest offices in government. To the public, however, almost all faults rest with the president.
11. On democracy, a good 67.7% of respondents in a survey say that they are very or somewhat satisfied with the democratic functioning in Taiwan. They are thus aware of the distinction between supporting a democratic regime and supporting individual office-holders. This indicates maturity in Taiwan's democracy.