

**The
Economist****Taiwan politics****Ma the bumbler****A former heart-throb loses his shine**

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WHEN he was first elected in 2008, Taiwan's president, Ma Ying-jeou, offered Taiwanese high hopes that the island's economy would open a new chapter. He promised ground-breaking agreements with China to help end Taiwan's growing economic marginalisation. At the time, Mr Ma's image was of a clean technocrat able to rise above the cronyism and infighting of his party, the Kuomintang (KMT). He was a welcome contrast to his fiery and pro-independence predecessor, Chen Shui-bian, now in jail for corruption.

Five years on, and despite being handily re-elected ten months ago, much has changed. In particular, popular satisfaction with Mr Ma has plummeted, to a record low of 13%, according to the TVBS Poll Centre. The country appears to agree on one thing: Mr Ma is an ineffectual bumbler.

Ordinary people do not find their livelihoods improving. Salaries have stagnated for a decade. The most visible impact of more open ties with China, which include a free-trade agreement, has been property speculation in anticipation of a flood of mainland money. Housing in former working-class areas on the edge of Taipei, the capital, now costs up to 40 times the average annual wage of \$15,400. The number of families below the poverty line has leapt. Labour activists have taken to pelting the presidential office with eggs.

Exports account for 70% of GDP. So some of Taiwan's problems are down to the dismal state of rich-world economies. Yet Mr Ma's leadership is also to blame. He has failed to paint a more hopeful future, with sometimes hard measures needed now. Worse, he frequently

tweaks policies in response to opposition or media criticism. It suggests indecisiveness.

Public anger first arose in June, when Mr Ma raised the price of government-subsidised electricity. Few Taiwanese understood why, even though Taiwan's state-owned power company loses billions. In the face of public outrage, Mr Ma postponed a second round of electricity price rises scheduled for December. They will now take place later next year.

People are also worried that a national pension scheme is on course for bankruptcy in less than two decades. Yet Mr Ma cannot bring himself to raise premiums sharply, because of the temporary unpopularity it risks. When Mr Ma does try to appeal to Taiwanese who make up the island's broad political centre, it often backfires with his party's core supporters. Following public grumbles that retired civil servants, teachers and ex-servicemen were a privileged group, the cabinet announced plans to cut more than \$300m in year-end bonuses, affecting around 381,000. The trouble was, veterans are among the KMT's most fervent backers. Now some threaten to take to the streets in protest and deprive the KMT of their votes until the plan is scrapped. Meanwhile, Mr Ma's clean image has been sullied by the indictment of the cabinet secretary-general for graft.

Cracks are starting to grow in the KMT façade. Recently Sean Lien, a prominent politician, criticised Mr Ma's economic policies, saying that any politician in office during this time of sluggish growth was at best a "master of a beggar clan"—implying a country of paupers.

But the next election is four years away, and presidential hopefuls will not try to oust or even outshine Mr Ma anytime soon. After all, they will not want to take responsibility for the country's economic problems. Nothing suggests Mr Ma's main policies will change (or that they should), but his credibility is draining by the day.

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