

An unfortunate tale of two mayors

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Something smells in Taipei — and it's not the 25 million flowers and plants purchased to decorate the city for the upcoming flora expo. Rather, it is Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) scrambling to explain why the city paid 30 times market price for the greenery to a contractor with ties to his Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) administration. In recent days, investigators have also uncovered what appears to be the overpricing of building materials. It is ironic that Hau initiated the multi-billion-dollar project to boost his re-election bid in November.

Meanwhile, Taichung Mayor Jason Hu (胡志強) is basking in public acclaim now that the man suspected of killing an alleged gangster in May has turned himself in. Hu had prayed publicly for the gunman's capture and said that with each passing month he felt he had no choice but to resign. With the culprit now behind bars and awaiting trial, all is well with the world. To celebrate, the minister of the interior and the director-general of the National Police Agency visited Taichung last week to offer their congratulations.

Needless to say, Hu is also up for re-election. Otherwise, what possible reason would there be to rejoice that a young man still in his teens will likely spend most of his life in prison, especially given that he was merely the triggerman, hired by others to commit a murder for which they will probably never be tried. The youth is a scapegoat for the fact that Taichung remains the organized crime capital of Taiwan, despite Hu's long tenure as mayor.

What is worse, the case came to public attention not because it involved one gangster killing another. That sadly is all too common. What attracted the national media was the four police officials who had been playing majhong with the victim yet made no effort to stop the crime or catch the shooter. Instead they hid under a table before fleeing the scene.

Nothing in Hu's triumphalism suggests an answer to the most important question. What were senior policemen doing consorting with an alleged gangster?

Hau has benefited greatly from the KMT's standard damage control strategy, the methods of which are all too familiar — blame low-ranking officials, but keep penalties mild to avoid infighting; distract attention from embarrassing details such as corruption with lurid ones — murder for example; display publicly both deep regret and passionate determination to reform; establish an official commission of inquiry under party control (Hau chairs Taipei's anti-corruption taskforce) and then, wait. Nothing better serves a government in power than a public with a short memory.

What we are witnessing here is not KMT arrogance, as it has been called, so much as the kind of sloppy corruption that comes from an inbred sense of entitlement in a party that has ruled both cities for far too long. Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) city councilors are to be commended for spotting budget irregularities associated with the flora expo. The media too has done an excellent job in presenting the information to the public, which for the moment at least seems to be duly incensed.

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However, if Taichung is any indication, this will not last. More must be done, and for longer. Above all, the DPP candidate for Taipei mayor, Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) and his colleague Su Jia-chyuan (蘇嘉元), who is running for Taichung mayor, must give voters a credible and viable alternative to Hau and Hu. They must also demand genuine political accountability.

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