

Hau Lung-bin's 'Secret Garden'

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Engulfed in a string of alleged irregularities over its procurement plans and construction projects, the 2010 Taipei International Flora Expo has seemingly become the Taipei City Government's "Secret Garden," blooming with dubious buds which have provided daily ammunition for the opposition's criticism of what it sees as the city government's incompetence and lack of integrity.

The daily bombardment from Democratic Progressive Party Taipei City councilors appears all too much for the city government to bear, as is evident by the latest move being considered by the city government: A plan to designate the expo sites as restricted areas.

On Monday night, the city government's Public Works Bureau proposed a regulation aiming at banning city councilors and the press from entering expo sites without prior approval from the expo's organizing committee. The city government argued that the draft regulation had been prompted by concerns over individuals' safety at the construction sites, given that the various projects are due to be completed soon. Taipei Deputy Mayor Lin Chien-yuan (林建元) added that the planned regulation could also prevent classified information about the expo's exhibitions from being leaked.

Lin's remarks prompted an immediate question in return: What classified information would there be within the flora expo's exhibitions? Judging by recent developments and the various controversies surrounding the expo, such as overpriced flower procurements and alleged inflated price tags for various exhibition items and construction materials, it appears to many that if there is indeed any classified information concerning the expo, it would primarily concern how the city government spent the taxpayers' money.

Instead, with its integrity in question and its reputation damaged, what the Taipei City Government needs to do is open its door wide to public scrutiny, rather than closing ranks and banning city councilors and the press from exercising their right to oversee municipal projects.

The latest move by the city government will remind many of its previous act of clearing away the homeless people who frequent the area near Longshan Temple (龍山寺) in the city's Wanhua District (萬華). While the city government maintained this had nothing to do with the expo, but that it was meant only to keep a clear path for pedestrians, many find it unconvincing.

Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) has time and again touted the expo as a source of pride for Taipei residents — and of course everyone wants it to be a successful event that makes every Taiwanese proud. Sadly, the Hau administration's handling of the expo so far has disappointed many, and the action of clearing away the homeless has already shamed the expo, with some comparing it to the notorious measures taken by Beijing authorities to chase away the homeless when it hosted the 2008 Olympics.

Hau is well advised to heed remarks by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) who, commenting on

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the string of controversies surrounding the expo and the Xinsheng Overpass construction project, rightly said: "Transparency is the best way out."

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