

Never let facts get in the way of a chance to smear political rivals has long been the mantra of Taiwanese politics, where many lawmakers and city or county councilors prefer headline-grabbing histrionics to the hard slog of actual work.

Even when there are legitimate grounds for complaints or criticism, they are often overshadowed by the need to score points, no matter the cost.

What else would explain the need to take placards to the Central Election Commission (CEC) as members of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) caucus did on Tuesday, when they demanded a meeting to complain about bias against KMT referendum proposals, or as other KMT lawmakers did on Thursday at the Taipei District Prosecutors' Office to press for criminal charges to be laid in connection with statements by the former deputy chairman of the Transitional Justice Commission.

The KMT caucus had already held news conferences to air its grievances before the protests, at which lawmakers were photographed holding placards or placing them on a vacant desk. What was gained by toting the placards, or having five lawmakers pose as they pretended to press a doorbell?

Members of the Democratic Progressive Party and other parties are equally guilty of such grandstanding, but it does seem that as the Nov. 24 nine-in-one elections draw closer, KMT legislators have become increasingly divorced from reality, be it Legislator Alicia Wang's (王淑惠) newfound desire to protect Taiwan's surviving "comfort women," or her colleagues attacking Representative to Japan Frank Hsieh (許水風) and Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) staff over perceived inaction in response to Taiwanese being stranded in Osaka, Japan, by Typhoon Jebi on Sept. 4 and an earthquake in Hokkaido the following day.

The KMT prefers to rely on statements from the Chinese consulate-general in Osaka and Hong Kong media reports that Chinese diplomats had arranged for buses to transport Chinese stranded at Kansai International Airport after storm surges from Jebi flooded runways and a terminal, and the bridge connecting the airport to the mainland was damaged by a tanker that crashed into it.

Playing politics with people's lives

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It matters not to the KMT that the Japanese government had to rely on small boats to ferry thousands of passengers and staff from the airport before it reopened one lane of the bridge, or that it initially restricted road traffic to its own buses, or that Osaka suffered major damage from the typhoon.

It matters not to the party that Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga has admitted that foreign nationals were ill-served at Kansai airport, as language barriers prevented them from being given information about emergency transportation services and accommodation.

No, somehow it is only the fault of Hsieh, TECRO staffers and, by extension, President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔣經國) government.

This is not to say that improvements could not be made to the way TECRO offices, and not just those in Japan, respond to natural disasters, just as any embassy or consulate would review their procedures after an emergency.

However, trying to make political capital out of such instances serves no one.

The high cost of such politicking has been brought home by the apparent suicide of Su Chii-chenng (蘇治全), director-general of TECRO's Osaka office, which was announced yesterday, the same day that TECRO staff at the five offices in Japan had been summoned for a meeting to review emergency procedures.

Su had been the target of a lot of the online criticism of TECRO following the typhoon; whether that contributed to his death is not known, but it does drive home the high cost of online invective and trolling — and of playing politics instead of actually working for the public.

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