

NTU president Kuan should resign

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Not long after Kuan Chung-ming (關陳明) took office as National Taiwan University (NTU) president, the Control Yuan on Tuesday decided to impeach him. This was just the latest development in a hugely controversial selection process for the top job in the nation's most prestigious university.

The reason for impeaching Kuan was his undertaking to supply from 2010 to 2016 opinion pieces, published anonymously, to Chinese-language Next Magazine, for which he received NT\$650,000 per year, on an understanding that he would be paid NT\$50,000 per month, with an additional NT\$25,000 every June and December.

The Control Yuan members who voted for his impeachment considered this to be in breach of the Civil Servant Work Act (公務員服務法), as Kuan was serving as minister without portfolio for part of that time. Article 14 of the act stipulates that a civil servant should not take on a paid position for another organization.

This is important, because people involved in the running of the nation advocating views — especially anonymously — in the media erodes public trust in the objectivity of the media in its role as the fourth estate. If Kuan's conduct does not run counter to the spirit of Article 14, what does?

Kuan, his lawyers and supporters have said that his understanding with Next Magazine was not formalized in a signed contract, so there is no legal basis for the decision to impeach. However, the Control Yuan has disagreed with that assessment.

The arrangement with Next Magazine certainly sounds like regular remuneration and many working in the media industry in Taiwan would surely consider it to be quite generous.

Kuan's supporters have also raised suspicions that the decision was politically motivated.

The Control Yuan, which has more members nominated by former president Ma Ying-jeou

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(馬英九) than by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), is generally considered to be more sympathetic to the pan-blue camp. Although not all members were present for the vote, six were Tsai appointees and five were Ma appointees. The vote was passed 7-4, which was possible because one Ma appointee, Fang Wan-fu (方萬福), voted for impeachment.

Ma, in response to the decision, said that Kuan was simply earning a little extra income. In other words, he was not breaking the rules, he was merely bending them. That Kuan was “bending” the rules consistently for seven years in this case alone should ring alarm bells about his suitability to serve as NTU president.

Other discrepancies were found during an investigation in March last year into Kuan’s tax returns over more than a decade, including his acceptance of paid work teaching at a university in China. Due to the amount of elapsed time, the decision to impeach did not take those indiscretions into account.

However, the record of the president of the nation’s top university ought to be beyond reproach, not simply beyond the statute of limitations.

There were flaws in his appointment process, although the NTU selection committee ultimately chose Kuan for university president because of his academic record and as he had risen through the system via legitimate channels.

However, the question Kuan and the nation should be asking is: What is the basic requirement for the president of the nation’s most prestigious university? Is it merely academic achievement and experience, or is there a need for the position to be held to the highest moral standards, too?

The protestations of Kuan and his supporters notwithstanding, he now has the dubious honor of being the first NTU president ever to be impeached.

What message does this send to the university’s students, who are taking their finals this week? What message does it send to academia internationally?

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Kuan should do the right thing and resign.

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