

Wang resigns over death penalty row

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In a surprise development, Minister of Justice Wang Ching-feng (王景弘) tendered her resignation last night, after initially saying she would not step down over the row about enforcing the death penalty.

Wang offered her resignation verbally to Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) around 10pm, Executive Yuan Spokesman Johnny Chiang (江丙坤) said, and Wu approved it after reporting the matter to President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九).

Wang's resignation came just hours after the Presidential Office broke its silence over the capital punishment issue to say that the death penalties handed down must be carried out and that any suspension of executions must follow the law.

"Taiwan is a country governed by the rule of law and everything must be achieved in accordance with the law. As for the death sentences, the Ministry of Justice must handle the matter properly in accordance with the law," Presidential Office Spokesman Lo Chih-chiang (羅智強) told a press conference yesterday afternoon. "If an execution must be suspended, it must be done so according to legal requirements."

Lo said abolishing the death penalty is a global trend, but the public is so polarized over the issue that it requires more "rational discussion."

In the meantime, the government would seek to prolong sentences for serious crimes, raise the parole threshold for life sentences, tighten the ruling procedures for death sentences and reduce death penalties through legal revisions, Lo said.

His press conference came after the president held a unscheduled meeting to discuss the issue in the wake of Wang's comment on Wednesday that she would not sign execution orders for the 44 inmates now on death row as long as she was in office.

The controversy over enforcing the death penalty began after Vice Minister of Justice Huang Shih-ming (黃世明), who Ma has nominated to be state prosecutor-general, told a legislative hearing on Monday that while the 44 people on death row should be executed, he would support an amendment abolishing the death penalty.

Lo said the administration would make an effort to phase out the death penalty, but he did not give a timetable. Lo also declined say if the government was studying the possibility of granting presidential pardons to the 44 death row inmates.

In response to the Presidential Office press conference, Deputy Minister of Justice Wu Chen Huan (吳陳煥) held a media briefing around 9:30pm and said Wang would not resign over the issue, but would ask the Council of Grand Justices to make a constitutional interpretation on the execution of death penalty.

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Wang showed up at the media briefing and emphasized that suspending executions did not violate the Constitution.

About an hour after she made that statement, however, the Executive Yuan confirmed that Wu had accepted Wang's resignation.

Wang had reiterated her arguments in favor of a moratorium on the death penalty at yesterday morning's weekly Cabinet meeting. She said abolishing the death penalty was a basic human rights principle.

Wang, who had previously worked as a human rights activist, told reporters after the Cabinet meeting that "human rights must move forward." Wang said abolishing the death penalty is a worldwide trend and despite the current five-year hiatus in executions, the murder rate had not increased. She also said that she was confident that the premier would not replace her.

"No nation in the world has ever replaced a justice minister because they believed the death penalty should be abolished," she said, adding that if Taiwan did so, it would become "an international laughingstock."

The Ministry of Justice has not approved an execution since December 2005.

The Executive Yuan had been ambiguous during the day, at first saying that capital punishment was a complex issue that the public should discuss and reach a consensus on. Later in the afternoon, however, the premier said Wang should sign off on the death penalties if the verdicts were not controversial and the inmates had exhausted their rights to an appeal.

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