

The latest international review on Taiwan's first national human rights report showed that the nation's efforts to protect human rights are falling short of international standards and there is still a long way to go before the nation can join other major countries in the development of human rights.

The review, presented last week by 10 human rights experts that were invited by President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration to assess the first national human rights report, urged the government to abolish capital punishment, suspend the execution of death sentences, reveal the truth behind the White Terror era, respect freedom of assembly and prevent monopolization of the media. The 84 recommendations listed by the experts included calls for the improvement of rights for migrant workers, Aborigines, women, gay and transgender people, and people with disabilities.

On an issue that has gathered great domestic attention, the experts said that the Ma administration should "take appropriate action in relation to the serious health problems of former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), who is serving an 18-and-a-half-year jail term for corruption during his presidency from 2000 to 2008.

Amid recent disputes over the government's proposal to hold a national referendum on whether to continue the construction of Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Gongliao (公寮), New Taipei City (新北市), the experts said that the Referendum Act (公投法) required an unusually high threshold for a referendum to take place that does not match the international trend, and the nation should amend the act to make referendums more practical.

In response to the flaws in human rights development pointed out by the experts, the Presidential Office and the Ministry of Justice were vague and disappointing, saying that the government will take the review seriously and increase efforts to improve the problems.

Ma has bragged about his administration's efforts to present the first national human rights report last year, which described the nation's progress in implementing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that he signed in 2009.

Action needed on human rights

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Inviting international experts on human rights to review the report, Ma said, further demonstrates the government's determination to meet international standards in the promotion of human rights.

However, the government's slow response to the review reflects its reluctance to take immediate action to improve the nation's human rights situation.

Taking the abolition of capital punishment as an example, Ma insisted that abolishing capital punishment is an ultimate goal for his administration. However, the Ministry of Justice carried out the death sentences of six convicts in December last year.

The government said, in response to the human rights report, that the goal to eliminate capital punishment would be reached gradually, but it has failed to offer solutions or explain measures it could adopt to reach such a goal.

The report also recognized the strict restrictions in the Assembly and Parade Act (集會遊行法) and promised to respect the freedom of assembly. However, police continue to remove protestors at street rallies. Barricades and shields are still set up at demonstrations to block people from getting their voices heard.

A series of recent protests organized by labor groups against the government's economic policies and pension reforms, which they say benefit corporations and ignore the rights of blue-collar workers, also raised doubts about the Ma administration's sincerity in improving human rights protection.

Simply signing the two UN covenants and having experts review a human rights report will not guarantee the improvement of human rights.

The Ma administration has made enough promises about defending human rights, but we need to see real action taken to carry out those promises.

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