

As Taiwanese readied to observe the 66th anniversary of the 228 Massacre last week, many were angered when it emerged that President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), at the behest of a descendant of a perpetrator, had sent a letter to Academia Sinica's Institute of Modern History asking it to uncover the "real facts" behind the incident.

For critics, Ma's request was regarded as an attempt to rewrite, possibly with the intent of whitewashing the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) responsibility, a dark, albeit defining, chapter in the nation's history.

While further studying of the causes, impact and future consequences of the massacre and the decades of the equally murderous White Terror that ensued, should be encouraged, it is shocking that, 66 years on, people in Taiwan, including Minister of Culture Lung Ying-tai (龍應台), can still question who bears ultimate responsibility — Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), governor Chen Yi (陳儀), unruly KMT soldiers, corrupt government officials or Taiwanese "thugs" — or how many people were slain, which is proof that the story is incomplete.

There are two main reasons why a full understanding of the massacre, or incident, depending on one's point of view, remains elusive to this day.

First and foremost, while the KMT has apologized, and compensation has been made to some families of the victims, Taiwan has not gone through a systematic process of truth and reconciliation, as experienced in South Africa following the abolition of apartheid, nor has it undergone the kind of lustration that followed the fall of communism in the former Czech Republic. Consequently, healing remains incomplete.

A second and related factor is the lack of access to all the government documents from that period. Under prevailing regulations, case files can only be seen at the request of direct family members of victims of the massacre.

With several families unwilling to reopen the wounds of this painful era or, for various reasons, uninterested in doing so, the result is that several cases will never see the light of day, and thus preclude historians from piecing together a thorough picture of the events. Academics,

Exposing the 228 Massacre's secrets

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historians and journalists with no family connection to victims cannot, on their own, see such files.

To be fair to the Ma administration, those regulations were not altered under previous KMT governments, or — and this is noteworthy — during the eight years of the Democratic Progressive Party administration. Part of the reason is that the case files are still treated as classified documents, the time-tried excuse used by public security and military agencies the world over to keep past misdeeds away from scrutiny.

One possible reason is that the actual role of the perpetrators and the severity of their acts may be much greater than what is commonly known, which in turn could result in calls for far greater compensation to the families of victims.

Ma can ask academics to take a fresh look at the events leading to and during the 228 Massacre, but as long as laws regulating access to the complete body of files are not changed, it will be impossible for the nation to really understand what happened and to fully comprehend the scope of human catastrophe. Making all the files public is the only way to uncover the truth.

Only then can it be determined, with a comfortable degree of certitude, whether individuals such as Peng Meng-chi (彭孟緝), also known as the “Kaohsiung butcher,” have been wronged by history, as his son now claims, or if they deserve such titles for ordering the murder of several Taiwanese.

Above all, the historical truth is what the nation needs to heal its wounds and rid itself of the source of a constant divide that prevents it from moving, of one heart, into the future.

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