

And the hits just keep on coming. Inappropriate and outrageous comments from officials of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration are nothing new, but few have been more jaw-dropping than those from former Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) chairman Chiang Pin-kung (蔣經國) and Control Yuan President Wang Chien-hsien.

At a forum on Sunday, Chiang urged Ma to seek a peace agreement and a pact on military confidence-building measures with China before the end of his term, and called for granting Chinese television stations, such as China Central Television and Phoenix Television, local broadcasting licenses.

Politicians across party lines were quick to criticize the ideas. Then Wang spoke up in favor of Chiang's proposals on Wednesday.

Both men said outstanding international news coverage by Chinese TV stations would fill the void left by their Taiwanese counterparts, which waste too much time on gossip and "irrelevant" domestic news. They also believe that worries about Beijing's united front strategy are unnecessary because Taiwan should have confidence in its democracy.

Their critique of local media outlets could be justified because these outlets have frequently been criticized for a lack of professionalism and international perspective. This issue is worth discussing.

However, how they can view China, one of the most restrictive countries in the world, as the messiah for Taiwan's media chaos is beyond belief. They also failed to suggest Taiwan seek reciprocal treatment for opening up its media market to Chinese TV stations. Wang did propose Taiwan receive the same treatment — but one year after Chinese media enter the local market.

In Freedom of the Press 2013, the latest report by Washington-based Freedom House, Taiwan was judged to have a "free" press with an overall "freedom score" of 26 points, one point lower than the previous year. China was rated as "not free" and home to "the world's most sophisticated censorship apparatus."

More jaw-dropping comments

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Chiang and Wang's comments raise two concerns. First, as bad as the local coverage of international news is, Taiwanese enjoy almost complete freedom of information from terrestrial and cable TV, radio and the Internet, while China regularly blocks Taiwanese and international news Web sites and frequently blacks out segments from international outlets such as CNN. It is true that one does not have to view the entrance of Chinese TV stations to the local market as a doomsday scenario, but reciprocity would be the key word here, hence the repeated calls from civic groups for a cross-strait media freedom protection agreement.

Second, the most shocking aspect of the comments is that they came from senior politicians, not Chinese officials, including the former top cross-strait negotiator no less. These comments have not only raised suspicions about the pair's position and integrity, but highlighted concern about an emerging group of "compradors" — the term used to describe Chinese managers working for foreign businesses in China during the Qing Dynasty. With more people, most of them businesspeople, reaping benefits from closer cross-strait trade, it appears that more Taiwanese are willing to parrot Beijing's line and demands.

Unfortunately, it has become the norm to hear such comments and demands from taishang (a term used to describe Taiwanese working in China) and businesspeople like those who have been trying to purchase more media outlets in Taiwan. However, when current and former officials are willing to sacrifice basic universal rights, such as personal safety and media freedom, and make Beijing's demands to their own government, Taiwan is in serious trouble.

Ma's persistent silence in the face of such talk only adds to the public's suspicions. He needs to do something to allay such concerns before things get out of hand.

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