

Signing the death warrant for Taiwan

Written by Chiu Hei-yuan 陳輝元
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Last month, three days after President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) received 15 members of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty (WCADP) steering committee, the Ministry of Justice executed six criminals. It is very likely that, when Ma was meeting the coalition's committee members, he was aware that the executions were due to take place three days later.

After the meeting with the president, the committee members visited the ministry, which had clearly already resolved to execute the six individuals.

Several committee members were still in Taiwan the day the government put the six to death and were astounded at the behavior of the president and ministry officials, who had received them, but did not say anything of their plans.

When defending his own stance on the death penalty to the members of the WCADP steering committee, Ma said that from 1991 to 2000, 277 prisoners were executed in Taiwan, compared with only 36 since 2000, seemingly implying that the reduction in the number of executions was a major achievement of his administration.

However, before Ma took office, Taiwan went three years without a single execution: It was Ma who reinstated the death penalty.

Ma presided over 73 executions in the period between 1993 and 1996, when he was minister of justice, more than double the number that took place in the decade or so since 2000.

When Ma was talking to the committee members, he said that he was clear on the issue of capital punishment, which simply meant that he was aware of what they were talking about.

When the WCADP chairman mentioned the overcrowding in Taiwanese prisons, Ma said that the government wanted to build more prisons, but that the public was against the idea.

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When the committee suggested that capital punishment be put on hold and that life sentences be given out instead, he responded by saying that this would just exacerbate the problem of overcrowding, as if there were thousands upon thousands of inmates on death row, when there are only about 60.

In March, an international panel of experts reviewing the nation's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights made 81 recommendations.

One of these was that the nation should work toward suspending capital punishment as soon as possible. When Ma spoke of these 81 recommendations to the WCADP committee, he sounded very pleased with himself, as if he had been awarded 81 points.

In reality, the recommendations represented the failings of the government in its compliance with the two covenants. Ma did not so much as mention the bit about suspending executions.

Ma sent six people to their deaths just three days after receiving this international contingent of members of the WCADP steering committee.

He was disingenuous in dealing with these representatives of the international community.

In defending his policy on the death penalty he was both arrogant and complacent, and he turned a deaf ear to the recommendations given by the panel reviewing the nation's record on the UN covenants that have been written into Taiwanese law.

Not only did he disregard the recommendations, he went ahead and flouted them within a matter of days of meeting the WCADP contingent. If this is how the president believes foreign relations should be conducted, he is essentially signing the death warrant for our country.

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