

Facing the Chen Shui-bian issue

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has been expecting this: while the “Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) issue” has been like a dark cloud hanging over the party for years, it knew that it would have to put an end to the complicated problem of the imprisoned former president.

And if the party tried to shrug off the issue, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) would not mind reminding the DPP again and again that Chen is serving a 20-year sentence for corruption and how his administration from 2000 to 2008, the first non-KMT administration after World War II, disappointed the Taiwanese people.

Five years after leaving office and 13 years after he was inaugurated, Chen, who has remained on the public radar with his corruption trials and treatment in prison, once again showed his lingering influence over the party when his application for DPP membership stirred up heated debate.

As if battles over gangsters' party membership applications and the party's lack of a China policy were not enough, the DPP suddenly found itself engaged in what could be one of the most complicated political issues in recent memory.

Any discussion about the “A-bian issue” without sufficient context would be meaningless and invite more emotional, and sometimes irrational, debate.

The sentiments surrounding Chen can be attributed to his background as the first DPP president, his charismatic leadership and political acumen, his efforts after former president Lee Teng-hui (李登輝) in raising awareness of Taiwanese identity, as well as the corruption charges against him and his family, pan-blue resentment and pan-green discontent with his pursuit of transitional justice and Taiwanese independence.

Meanwhile, the controversy and divisive views about Chen appear to have emerged from political interference in his prosecution, the judiciary's insistence on treating Chen like any other prisoner rather than a former head of state and the KMT's attempts to drag the DPP down with Chen with every opportunity it gets.

All these factors prevent the DPP and the public from reaching a consensus on a man who is both hated and revered.

So what will be the final assessment of Chen's legacy? And what would his epitaph be? Before going further, a number of questions should be raised.

Should Chen be seen either as a saint who could do no wrong or a sinner who did everything wrong?

Could Chen's behavior be justified by the lack of procedural justice in his prosecution on corruption charges?

How could Chen's guilt and his place in history possibly be determined if he was not given a fair trial?

Why has his term in office been dismissed as "eight wasted years" simply because of the scandal, while the efforts made by hundreds of thousands of public officials in his administration were completely ignored?

Are people, in particular pan-green supporters, required to support and endorse Chen's past and current behavior, including his rejoining the party, and should they be condemned if they are not supportive?

Who else if not President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) holds the key to reconciliation — a word uttered by too many politicians with too little effort being made — and resolving the conflicts between different ethnicities, political ideologies and identities that have divided this nation for far too long?

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The answers to these questions will not be found any time soon. The only way to find them would be to start discussing them while approaching the Chen Shui-bian issue with pragmatism and an understanding of what is on the minds of people at opposite ends of the political spectrum.

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