

The Ministry of Justice's Agency of Corrections on Monday rejected former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) application for medical parole. However, in an unusual move, Minister of Justice Luo Ying-shay (羅英祥) made three suggestions: that Chen could file another appeal to the Taipei District Court, lodge an objection with the Taiwan High Court, or ask the corrections agency for a new diagnosis. This has fueled hopes that another petition could be approved, and, as the world marked International Human Rights Day yesterday, could be seen as a positive development.

In the eyes of many Taiwanese, there are many different aspects to the Chen case. For his supporters, his imprisonment is a political sentence, a case of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) persecuting a political enemy. For them it is a symbol of polarization between the pan-blue and pan-green camps. In the eyes of Chen's opponents, he is paying the price for corruption and abuse of power while in office, and his sentence is a matter of justice that cannot be negotiated.

For political scientists, the fact that a former president is in prison is unhelpful to national reconciliation. For a prison manager, the rules for medical parole are clear cut: Unless a prisoner is bedridden and unable to move, it would be very difficult to meet these requirements, and as they see it, Chen is far from meeting this condition. For doctors, Chen's mental and physical health is deteriorating, and medical treatment at home would be the most appropriate solution.

Everyone has a different interpretation of Chen's situation, and they will suggest different ways to handle the case, but the most appropriate approach would be to follow public opinion.

According to Taipei Veterans General Hospital physician Kuo Cheng-tien (郭成田), who recently saw Chen, the former president suffers from severe brain degeneration, dementia, incontinence and coughing that, if severe, could lead to asphyxia and death.

One can only wonder what has happened to human dignity when an old, decrepit man whose hands and legs are shaking, cannot speak clearly, drools and is incontinent is locked up in a small cell without proper medical attention. Moreover, that person is a former president and not even those who hated him feel happy when they see that all that remains of a man who once used to lead the nation with vigor and energy being nothing more than a candle weakly

Chen release a step to reconciliation

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flickering in the wind.

Chen has been deprived of his freedom for six years, and it is time to let him go home. His family and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) are now being joined in their calls by more members of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) top leadership, with New Taipei City Mayor Eric Chu (郝龍斌), Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) and Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平) urging leniency.

The Constitution protects the president from criminal prosecution during his or her term, although illegal actions can be prosecuted after a president steps down. Former US president Gerald Ford pardoned his predecessor, Richard Nixon, in 1974, and in 1997, then-South Korean president Kim Young-sam pardoned former president Chun Doo-hwan. These presidents focused on protecting national dignity and promoting domestic political reconciliation.

As the lack of proper treatment for Chen and word of his difficult situation spread domestically and internationally, the seeds of hatred are planted. In Taipei's political circles, a rumor is now spreading that Ma, with his extremely low support rating, fears that he will become the victim of retaliation and be sent to prison if the DPP gains power when he steps down. Such worries are evidence that Taiwan's political culture and democratic system are strongly distorted, and that Ma's treatment of Chen is what lies behind it all. It is high time to change the political culture, turn the struggle into reconciliation and let an old man return home to get the medical treatment he needs.

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