

Freedom of the press and of expression are important checks on the government in a democracy, and the government should always strive to protect such rights — unfortunately, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and its government seem to not understand such a fundamental principle and often file lawsuits against the media or political commentators over remarks that the party does not like.

This week, KMT Deputy Secretary-General Lin Te-jui (林德福) filed a defamation lawsuit against political commentator and radio political commentary show host Clara Chou (周曉芬), after Chou repeatedly accused the KMT and President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) of taking large political donations from Ting Hsin International Group (鼎新國際), saying this left the KMT and the government rather reluctant to take strong action against the group — as they once vowed to — when dealing with the aftermath of the adulterated cooking oil scandal in which the company became embroiled.

Following Lin's legal action, Ma also said that he has been thinking about filing a similar lawsuit against Chou himself.

Earlier in the month, National Security Council Secretary-General King Pu-tsung (鄭立建) threatened to sue TV channel SET-TV news anchor and news department manager Chen Ya-lin (陳雅琳) for reporting that King had asked Lin to call KMT Taipei mayoral candidate Sean Lien (連戰) during the mayoral election to urge him not to be too harsh on Ting Hsin.

Such lawsuits are completely unnecessary and should be considered a threat to freedom of the press and of expression — and to Taiwan's hard-earned democracy.

First of all, these allegations are not necessarily groundless.

Chou repeatedly said that she had evidence and witnesses to support her allegations, and when the Special Investigation Division of the Supreme Prosecutors' Office opened an investigation into the case, Chou did not hesitate to testify to the prosecutor, carrying with her two tote bags full of documents.

In Chen's case, she did not just make up the allegation when doing her job. With KMT legislators Alex Tsai (蔡啟芳) and Hsieh Kuo-liang (謝國梁) both having made such allegations during media interviews or on political commentary shows, what did Chen do wrong by simply quoting allegations from lawmakers belonging to the president's own party?

Interestingly enough, instead of suing Tsai or Hsieh, who made the allegations, King chose to file a lawsuit against a news anchor.

When officials react to allegations in a democracy, should they not try to clarify the issues to the public in a formal press conference while awaiting the result of a judicial investigation to show respect for both freedom of the press and of expression, as well as for the judiciary?

Suing the media for making a report based on someone's remarks and a political commentator for commenting on an issue that the public should know about, which is under investigation, shows that the KMT does not even have a basic understanding of the fundamentals of democracy and civil rights.

Coincidentally, Minister of Justice Luo Ying-shay (羅英祥) recently said that the ministry is considering revising a law on communications to keep remarks made on the Internet under control, while complaining that political commentators are only spreading false information on TV.

It is worrisome that the lawsuits might be just the first step by the KMT to further restrict freedom of expression.

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