

Government bumbles Chen parole

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Sometimes President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and his government handle things in ways that make one wonder whether to laugh or cry. The administration's handling of former president Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) request for medical parole has taken so many frustrating twists and turns that, in the end, no one will thank the government even if Chen is granted medical parole.

Chen, who has been imprisoned on corruption charges, is suffering from a range of medical conditions. Prior to the Nov. 29 elections, the government took a tough stance, but following the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) drubbing at the ballot box, it finally changed its tune: Minister of Justice Luo Ying-shay (羅英祥) said that the rejection of medical parole could be appealed or that a new request could be filed, and following two meetings, the 15 members of the Ministry of Justice's medical evaluation team finally agreed that Chen should be released on medical parole.

But good things never come easy. After the medical team's report had been organized by Taichung Prison, official documentation should have been submitted to the ministry's Agency of Corrections. Although no one thought Chen would spend Christmas at home, that he would at least be home in time for New Year's Day was not unreasonable. However, the ministry announced that Chen would not be released before New Year's Day, because there was not enough time to review the documentation.

The reason given was that the car carrying the documentation from Taichung Prison was stuck in traffic and would not make it to the ministry during office hours, so the case could be reviewed only after the new year holidays. This clearly illustrates the government's administrative inefficiency, bureaucratic stubbornness and inability to change.

If the documentation had been sent electronically, this farcical delay would never have occurred. Although the ministry insisted that there were many important attachments that could not be sent electronically, a review could have been initiated based on the electronically transmitted version and the final decision could have been made once the attachments arrived. Even though they were not transmitted electronically, the review team was well aware that the documents left Taichung Prison at 2pm, and that the trip to Taipei normally takes at least two hours. Even if delivery were delayed by a couple of hours due to traffic, there would still have been time to conclude the review if the ministry really wanted to let Chen spend the holiday at home, since it could have told the review team to wait a little longer.

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Although this is a legal issue, everyone understands that it is highly political. If the government intends to use Chen's request for medical parole to promote reconciliation with the opposition parties and promote social harmony, the constant interference created by "technical issues" that could have been solved easily leaves the impression that the government is procrastinating, unwilling to resolve the issue and handling the issue in a very awkward manner. Even if the government was trying to make a show of friendship toward Chen and his family, friends and supporters, that friendship will not be accepted.

Another victim of the twists and turns in the medical parole issue is former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮), who is on a hunger strike in support of Chen's release. Because of the government's repeated delays, Lu has had to extend her hunger strike. She started her protest on Sunday, but due to the government's procrastination it had to be extended until Wednesday. She has now been hospitalized due to health concerns. If her health deteriorates, that would also have to be blamed on the government.

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