

The past should not be forgotten

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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People First Party (PFP) presidential candidate James Soong (宋楚瑜), echoing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) concluding remarks about Taiwan's democratization in the second and final televised presidential debate on Saturday, said that he "had made efforts" in the democratization process. While the question of whether a purge or a lustration would be the best approach to transitional justice is yet to be answered, one thing that is for sure is that no one who respects their nation should overlook a politician blurring — if not outright falsifying — their past.

Purges and lustrations are measures that some democratized nations, especially in post-communist Eastern Europe, carried out to "clean" the reorganized state apparatus from the public officials of the authoritarian past to achieve transitional justice. Public officials above a certain rank were purged and banned from government posts, and in the case of lustration, those who worked for agencies associated with human rights abuses were investigated before assuming public office or running in elections.

Soong said that he fought in the process of "walking out of Martial Law and toward democracy," in which the "10,000-year parliament and Article 100 of the Criminal Code, which provided the legal basis for the imprisonment of people convicted of treason and subversive activities, were abolished."

Taiwan might not, or would never, have such laws again. However, it is appalling that the public, lacking proper historical education, could be served by politicians and public figures who believe that they can, without any consequence, not only gloss over the past, but vaunt their past deeds in a way that contradicts the truth.

Soong served as the director-general of the Government Information Office from 1979 to 1984, when he was appointed as director of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) Culture and Communication Work Committee. He banned at least 47 pro-democracy publications or had their publishers closed down. In the aftermath of a pro-democracy demonstration on Dec. 10, 1979, which resulted in scores of arrests in what later came to be known as the Formosa Magazine incident, Soong called the demonstrators "rioters" conspiring to "deliberately manufacture causeless commotion," and accused foreign media outlets of "yellow journalism," saying that they disparaged the KMT out of prejudice and published distorted reports.

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In 1981, after Chen Wen-chen (陳文成), a professor at Carnegie Mellon University who had been financially supporting the then-burgeoning democratic movement and was visiting Taiwan, died mysteriously. The Associated Press reporter Tina Chou (周敏) quoted Chen's father as saying that two Americans who came to Taiwan to investigate the case "performed an autopsy" on him. Soong insisted the phrase be changed to "viewed" in order to protect the "nation's autonomy and jurisdiction." Chou resisted and was stripped of her press credentials.

A volunteer at the Chen Wen-chen Memorial Foundation took to Facebook after the second debate, asking young people to imagine former premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜華) — who is known for the "324 violent eviction" of protestors staging a sit-in at the Executive Yuan compound during the 2014 Sunflower movement — 30 years from now, saying how he in 2014, stopped China's encroachment on Taiwan via the cross-strait service trade agreement.

"Soong is playing that disgusting role now," he said.

While Soong tries to appeal to the younger generation with his "non-blue, non-green, middle-way" stance, he is also cashing in on the nation's poor memory of its past, or worse, its indifference to historical justice.

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