

No more trials by media

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Investigations by prosecutors in Taiwan are a bit like moving water in a bucket riddled with holes — you can count on leaks. Once a criminal investigation is under way, the details soon find their way into the papers and onto TV. Some media outlets and TV pundits then “improve” on the reports. Even if a suspect is later exonerated, it is hard to shake off the “sentence” passed in a trial by media. This essentially undermines the right to a fair trial and should be a concern regardless of whether the suspect is former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) or a baseball player suspected of match-fixing.

The players investigated and interrogated in the latest baseball scandal have made headlines at every media outlet. Some of Taiwan’s best-known players have been investigated — most notably, former Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Tsao Chin-hui (蕭欽輝). Tsao admits to having dinner with a bookmaker on four occasions, but denies agreeing to do anything unlawful.

Baseball is Taiwan’s national sport, but following a series of match-fixing scandals, it is flagging. This scandal may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back.

Although the facts remain unclear, details of the investigation have already leaked and the media have reported that Tsao “didn’t tell prosecutors the truth,” leaving Brother Elephants general manager Hung Jui-ho (洪金寶) no choice but to distance himself from Tsao and fire four players implicated in the scandal.

The players’ innocence or guilt should be determined based on evidence and in accordance with the law. Prosecutors have not even finalized the indictments, yet judging from the news, one would think Tsao has been convicted and the Elephants and the whole baseball league will go down with him.

The media are turning up the heat, and Tsao is getting sucked into a judicial maelstrom. The reality is that it will be very difficult for him ever to return to the baseball field.

If Tsao and other suspects are found guilty, they should of course suffer the consequences. But if they are innocent, they should not have to shoulder responsibility for mistakes committed by prosecutors during the investigation.

Prosecutors leaking confidential details of an investigation is nothing new. In some scandals, secrets are leaked to the media on a daily basis. But such leaks should not be ignored. They should be reported to the Control Yuan or to the Ministry of Justice. This is the only way to stem the flow of leaks to the media that can result in a guilty verdict from society before a case has even reached court.

Match-fixing has been investigated on several occasions in the past. Each time, a few hapless players are found guilty, while the criminal organizations behind the gambling on games go scot-free.

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As a result, match-fixing soon reappears, leading teams to disband, players to retire and disappointed fans to lose interest. This is causing the popularity of domestic baseball to dwindle.

While it is praiseworthy that prosecutors take alleged match-fixing seriously, the judiciary must do a better job at assuring fair trials — not trials by media — and catching the masterminds behind the crimes.

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