

Squeaky clean Ma likes to roll in the mud

Written by Chang Kuo-tsai 張國才

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“Don’t put on your shoes in a melon patch; don’t adjust your cap under a plum tree”: So goes the Chinese idiom *gua tian li xia*, used to refer to suspicious circumstances best avoided.

Its meaning seems to be lost on former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), a man who considers himself above suspicion.

Many will recall a touching scene of then-presidential candidate Ma riding pillion on former Executive Yuan secretary-general Lin Yi-shih’s (林益世) motorcycle on Nov. 19, 2007.

Lin was a trusted aide, Ma’s golden child — a former Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) deputy chairman and Executive Yuan secretary-general who had participated in an anti-corruption march the previous year.

However, Lin was found to have so many US dollars at home that when prosecutors came knocking, he tried to burn them or flush them down the toilet. He was later found guilty of accepting and soliciting bribes over shady deals involving China Steel, and jailed for 13-and-a-half years.

Was Ma, pure as the driven snow as he is, tainted in any way by his proximity to this dirty money?

Then there was Ma’s golden girl, aide and former Taipei City councilor Lai Su-ju (賴素珠), who was sentenced on Aug. 31 last year to nine years in jail for accepting a NT\$1 million (US\$33,322) bribe from Taipei Gateway International Development.

Did the spotless Ma completely cut ties with Su after the event?

Questions have been raised over Ma’s role in Fubon Bank’s takeover of state-owned Taipei

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Bank in 2002, when Ma was mayor. Fubon was sold 44 branches of Taipei Bank — all prime real estate — at an extremely low valuation.

Given Ma's reputation for being squeaky clean, how dodgy do the optics have to be before people start talking about melon patches and plum trees?

There were the circumstances leading to the Taipei Dome construction contract between the Taipei City Government under then-mayor Ma and Farglory Group, and what went on between Farglory founder Chao Teng-hsiung (趙騰興) and Ma during several "social calls" — Chao's own words — ending with Farglory not having to pay royalties, worth about NT\$3 billion.

How much of a coincidence is it that Wei Ying-chun (魏英春), a guest speaker at a national industry and commerce benefit in support of Ma's 2012 presidential campaign, has exactly the same name as former Ting Hsin Oil and Fat Industrial chairman Wei Ying-chung, jailed for his part in a tainted oil scandal?

No coincidence at all: They are one and the same person.

Can he manage to remain unblemished from his association with the tainted oil scandal?

Five of the six visits to the Presidential Office Building by Ching Fu Shipbuilding president Chen Ching-nan (陳清南), now involved in a minesweeper procurement scandal, were made during Ma's term. Chen and his wife were seated in VIP seats during a banquet held at the Presidential Office Building for the prime minister of Tuvalu and the president of Nauru.

Was this a coincidence?

Yet Ma's innocence has been acknowledged countless times by Taipei district prosecutors and the Taipei District Court.

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Trusted aides have been convicted of accepting bribes. He has received “social calls” from dodgy businessmen and attended banquets and state dinners under dubious circumstances and for dubious reasons.

Hats off to Ma if he manages to emerge from all this as spotless as a lotus from the pond.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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