

Scandal casts shadow over NSB

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When President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) last week returned from a trip to the nation's Caribbean allies, some National Security Bureau (NSB) officials allegedly tried to take advantage of the presidential delegation's rapid customs clearance treatment to smuggle more than 10,000 cartons of cigarettes into the nation, but the trucks carrying the contraband goods were seized trying to leave the airport.

The absurd scene was a repeat of another case, in which more than 39kg of cocaine was found last month in the luggage of a Brazilian military officer set to accompany Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro to the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan.

What kind of country is so undisciplined? The scandal made all Taiwanese lose face.

Following the incident, the Presidential Office rather confusingly said that Tsai was "deeply infuriated."

In addition to the president's anger, surely the people in charge should resign their posts immediately.

Fortunately, later that day, NSB director-general Peng Sheng-chu's (彭盛楚) resignation was approved, and chief aide-de-camp to the president Chang Chieh (張齊) was transferred to another post.

Tsai that night posted a three-point statement on Facebook, saying the scandal violated the official rules of conduct, left a bad impression on society and blurred the focus of her overseas trip.

These are not the most serious problems and perhaps what the public cares about more is that the NSB, the agency responsible for important government duties, such as the integration of national security intelligence and the planning for special security tasks, repeatedly dropped the ball and only became aware of the smuggling the third time it was committed by the officials.

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Can the agency ever be trusted again?

Peng should of course shoulder responsibility, and he should have resigned long ago.

Since he took office in October 2016, those political circles have wondered how he was able to keep his job for so long, and they were forced to draw two conclusions: First, Tsai could not find a replacement, and second, Peng was “one of her people.”

If it had not been for this incident, surely he would have stayed on until the end of his term on May 20 next year.

To be blunt, the philosophy of only recruiting “one’s own people” regardless of their abilities amounts to shooting oneself in the foot.

People familiar with the situation surely know that appointing Peng as head of the NSB was a bad move. Before he replaced Yang Kuo-chiang (楊國章), former National Security Council (NSC) deputy secretary-general Lu Sheau-jung (盧紹雄) was highly recommended by all sides as replacement for Yang. Given his outstanding training, experience and background, Lu was superior to Peng in every way.

However, Tsai’s close aides were hesitant about recruiting Lu, as he was NSC deputy secretary-general during former president Ma Ying-jeou’s (馬英九) terms in office.

Instead, she put Peng in the critical position, because he had been promoted by then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) to head the Ministry of National Defense’s Military Intelligence Bureau (MIB).

Tsai failed to consider how Peng, after serving as MIB head for just 10 months, from June

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2015 to March 2016, would be capable of dealing with all the intrigues at the NSB.

As people say: “One bad move leads to another.”

Peng’s resignation seemed inevitable as the situation approaches the boiling point.

If Tsai continues to follow the same agenda at a time when the presidential election is only half a year away, she would not be able to find the right people, and the NSB, and even the NSC, are likely to continue to be headed by “her own people.”

As the presidential campaign heats up, will such a national security team be able to stand up to the challenges from home and abroad, so the president would not have to become “deeply infuriated” again?

There is nothing else to say, but “good luck.”

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Translated by Eddy Chang

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