

Decisive action on corruption needed

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Politicians behave as if they believe the electorate is gullible or suffers from poor long-term memory. When they are at their most disingenuous, such as during election campaigns, it is important to call them out.

So it is with the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) attempts to paint the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as the single corrupt party in the nation.

Kaohsiung City Councilor Jane Lee (李麗芬), the KMT's candidate for the Kaohsiung mayoral by-election on Saturday, is running her campaign on the theme of being corruption-free. This is an attempt not only to distract from the allegations of plagiarism leveled against her, but also to leverage the attention on DPP Legislator Su Chen-ching (蘇震雄), who is under investigation in the Pacific Sogo Department Store corruption case.

KMT members on Tuesday held a news conference calling on Premier Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌) to apologize over several corruption scandals, citing figures of a party-commissioned poll.

Glossing over the intricacies of effective polling used at times when the goal is actionable truth, the survey relied on laughably weighted questions and a studious misinterpretation of the results.

One question asked if respondents thought it appropriate for the Taiwan Railways Administration to spend NT\$15.49 million (US\$524,374) on improving its brand image while owing employees two months of overtime pay. The KMT said that 72 percent of respondents responded negatively.

Of course they did: The question was intentionally worded and structured in a way to get that very result. It is also how politicians of all stripes seek to manipulate figures and opinions.

However, a few facts might help.

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According to Ministry of Justice data, the past three years saw an increase in the number of people prosecuted for corruption. The figure rose from 703 in 2017 to 750 in 2018 and 805 last year. There is a clear upward trend, and all within President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) first term.

However, this trend needs some context. From 2010 to 2015 — during then-president Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) KMT administration, the yearly figure was more than 1,000 people. It reached a high of 1,648 in 2014.

The trend is also not borne out by the sums involved in the corruption cases. In 2017, this number stood at NT\$521.7 million; it fell the following year to NT\$170 million, before increasing slightly again last year to NT\$190 million.

By contrast, in 2014, the total sum involved was more than NT\$1 billion.

Corruption does not belong to any one party. It is important to remember that the Sogo scandal has ensnared members of the DPP, the KMT and the New Power Party, and that new allegations could yet arise.

The informed and discerning swing voter will not be persuaded by the KMT's clumsy attempts at distraction. However, this does not mean that the DPP or Tsai can relax. The present investigation has real potential to damage them both.

In Tsai's case, this is because of her close association with Su Jia-chyuan (蘇嘉元), who resigned as Presidential Office secretary-general because of his relationship to his nephew, Su Chen-ching. Su Jia-chyuan is not just a close ally of Tsai; she has relied heavily on his support for the past decade in a party operating, albeit unofficially, along factional lines. In many ways, he has been integral to Tsai's ability to balance the power bases within the party.

The problem involves not only the DPP's structure, but the political culture in the nation as a whole. Neither will be easy to address.

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In the battle for public perception, Tsai needs to take decisive action now, above and beyond simple demands for individual party members to act according to a higher moral standard.

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