

Professors call for archives to be open

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The Taiwan Association of University Professors called for government records to be accessible for “reasonable use,” saying administrative arbitrariness and overinterpretation of the Personal Information Protection Act (個人資料保護法) have either made the Archives Act (檔案法) meaningless or violated it.

The truth about the past and transitional justice rely on an open government archive, but government agencies have excessive administrative discretion over whether the records should be made public, and regulations protecting personal information make information inaccessible, the association said.

Taking the changes to high-school curriculum guidelines as an example, the association said: “The related documents, after the guidelines were made public, have all become government records, and information that should be open to examination and research. However, the reality is that the involved parties, researchers and even legislators could not access the records, making evaluation impossible, which actually contradicts the Archives Act.”

A signature drive has been launched to call for government action on making government records more accessible and as of May, more than 400 people have signed the petition, including 94 history professors, 47 professors in other disciplines, 96 graduate students, 15 secondary and elementary-school teachers and 14 history and law experts.

According to the Archives Act, if the Legislative Yuan has not approved a delay in the publication, “national archives shall be accessed for utilization no later than 30 years after creation.”

“We are asking the government to automatically declassify records after 30 years,” National Chengchi University Graduate Institute of Taiwan History Hsueh Hua-yuan (許華元) said.

REDACTION

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“Records concerning transitional justice should be exempt from being redacted ‘on the basis of the public interest’ under the the Personal Information Protection Act.” Hsueh said. “And the data concerning the execution of public affairs by civil servants or people employed by government agencies, such as informers, should not be protected by the act either.”

National Dong Hwa University associate history professor Chen Chin-ching (陳進興) said open access to the archive is only the first step toward transitional justice.

“But now we do not even have the files needed to make history known. Without an open archive, transitional justice is a non-starter,” he said.

The petition also demands that unclassified documents be accessible to the public and are not pulled from the shelves on the pretext of the protection of personal information protection, and that what has been declassified should not be resealed.

A history researcher at the press conference shared his experience of encountering resealed government archives on certain sensitive issues.

“I’ve done research on the Diaoyutai Islands (釣魚台) dispute and published articles on it. I have been told by my fellow researchers that the related files, cited in my dissertation, were then made unavailable to researchers,” Academia Sinica postdoctoral fellow Jen Tien-hao (詹天豪) said.

Hsueh said the campaigners do not seek to blame low-level public servants, who have excessive discretion over the redaction and declassification of documents due to the lack of clear-cut regulations, but call on the government to make its stance on an open archive clear by making transparency-friendly interpretations of existing laws.

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