

Lesson for us in row engulfing Taiwan university

Out of the Box

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CAN YOU IMAGINE a university without a president, or a government without a minister of education? Can you imagine a time without both? Well, I discovered, to my amazement, that's happening in Taiwan right now, and at the flagship National Taiwan University.

I was in Taipei a few weeks ago attending the annual meeting of the Association of Pacific Rims University, hosted by NTU as part of its 90th anniversary celebration. There are 50 universities in APRU, including the United States, Canada, Mexico, Chile to Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, Thailand, Philippines and Russia. The SAR is well represented by the University of Science and Technology, University of Hong Kong and Chinese University.

What piqued my interest was that after the first

day of meeting, I returned to my hotel room and turned on the TV and started surfing the channels.

On a local channel, there was a talk show with four to five hosts and guests talking vigorously about universities. They talked about *ba kuan*, which literally means "removing a tube" or "sacking Mr Kuan" – which I did not understand at first.

Then they lamented that Taiwan's flagship university did not have a president and might not have one for some time, that two education ministers had resigned in six months, and that there was a dispute between the university and the ministry of education.

And all these developments were happening while I was attending an international meeting hosted by NTU. It seemed kind of surreal.

I know the immediate past NTU president Yang Pan-chyr personally and the controversy surrounding his decision to step down as president last year.

It had to do with charges of fraud in one of the research papers that he had co-authored. He had stated that his role, as a thoracic surgeon, was to supply the tissue sample to another team for analysis.

That was already big news in Taiwan. Then I vaguely remembered hearing about some trouble about the appointment of the new president of

NTU earlier this year. NTU's search committee had recommended its selection, a NTU professor named Kuan Chung-ming, for the ministry of education to approve but he was turned down.

Among the reasons for its decision are: he had traveled to lecture in the mainland without adhering to NTU's policy, that he had been working part-time for several mainland universities, and that he had been serving as a director for a private telecom company without NTU approval.

But quickly the matter escalated to become a political issue, as Kuan's supporters claim that he was rejected because he was in the "blue" camp. The then education minister was bombarded by opposing demands and resigned under pressure.

Then the government appointed a new minister, who officially decided to reject the case, after which he resigned (serving only about 40 days).

Now NTU's academic senate is threatening to sue the government, claiming its academic freedom is being violated. In the meantime, NTU's provost professor Kuo Tei-wei is serving as acting president, and he was our host at the APRU meeting.

Given the threat of lawsuit, NTU may not have a president for a while.

The TV panelists were saying that this ongoing

saga has really hurt NTU's reputation, to say the least. They explicitly referred to the APRU meeting as a public relations disaster, given that so many presidents of leading universities were present.

Frankly, most of the presidents, not being Chinese readers, had no idea what was going on, or even that such a controversy existed.

This saga naturally brings up the issue of governance at NTU. I was told that NTU, unlike most Hong Kong and international universities, does not have a university council/board.

The presidential search committee had several government representatives as members but university members make up a significant majority.

Historically, the government had always approved the search committee's selection, although legally it does have the right to reject nominations.

So this case has all the ingredients for an academic controversy of importance: governance, legality versus tradition, and politics.

In the meantime, the university suffers.

Hong Kong universities are not short of controversies, and all the ingredients for such rows are present with us too. But our controversies have not been of this magnitude, at least not so far.

I hope we can keep it that way.