

Citizen group campaign throws South Korean elections into chaos

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23 February 2000

An alliance of nearly 500 citizens groups has thrown national elections in South Korea into turmoil after publishing last month for the first time a “black list” of 164 politicians. These groups described those on the list as “corrupt, lazy and incompetent” and “unfit” to be in office.

The two leading groups—the Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) and the Citizens Alliance for the 2000 General Elections (CAGE)—have called on parties not to endorse any of those named for the elections due to be held in April. They have vowed to carry out a civil disobedience campaign against anyone on the lists who is made a candidate or who wins office after the election.

The campaign has worried the major political parties as it has met up with widespread disaffection and hostility among broad layers of voters against the entire political establishment. According to a senior diplomat quoted by CNN in Seoul: “I think this is the most interesting political movement in Asia since the People Power revolution in the Philippines in the 1980s. If the Chinese are watching this, they must be sitting back and saying ‘whoa.’”

The majority of those on the list, with the exception of a small number of independents, are from the three main political parties. These are the opposition Grand National Party (GNP), the right-wing United Liberal Democrats (ULD) and the ruling party of President Kim Dae-jung, which has been recently relaunched as the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP).

The most prominent figure named is the ULD’s founder Kim Jong-pil, who until early this year was the country’s prime minister. The civic groups are demanding his retirement from politics citing his role in fomenting the 1961 military coup and in a corruption scandal in the 1980s. The MDP has been in coalition

with the ULD even though Kim Jong-pil as former head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) had in the early 1970s been responsible for a plot to assassinate Kim Dae-jung, then a leading anti-government figure.

Other politicians on the list include National Assembly Speaker Park Jyun-kyu, MDP parliamentary leader Park Sang-cheon, a close associate of the president Kwon Roh-kap and GNP factional leader Kim Yoon-whar. Also named are former intelligence chief Lee Jong-chan, former deputy premier and finance minister Kim Mahn-je and ex-defense minister Chung Ho-yong.

The parties have either attempted to disregard the list or openly attack it. Some politicians claim that the list is illegal as it breaches an electoral law, which bars non-political groups from engaging in electoral campaigns. Others, particularly from the ULD and GNP, have branded the actions of the citizen groups as “political terrorism”. But all the parties are having to take notice of the list.

Polls indicate as many as 80 percent of voters support the list campaign and will not vote for those named. Moreover, support for all the major parties has eroded since the last elections. According to one poll, support for the ruling MDP has almost halved from 41.2 percent to 21 percent over the last two years since Kim Dae-jung came to power with his reputation as a “democrat” and a reformer. Support for the conservative GNP was only 18.1 percent and for junior coalition partner, the ULD, a mere 2.7 percent. President Kim Dae-jung has paid lip service to the CAGE and CCEJ groups’ calls for democracy by promising to amend the country’s election laws. A CCEJ official commented: “Many of the clauses in the current election law make it difficult to distinguish

between citizen's rights to know and illegal, premature electioneering."

At present, parties are allowed to openly campaign only after a date set down by the Central Election Management Commission (CEMC), in the case of these elections March 28. The law puts minor, unknown parties at a major disadvantage as they have limited time to campaign and if they are caught doing so before the legal date face criminal charges and possible jail terms.

As one commentator noted: "While the incumbents can promote themselves through party members meetings and conferences reporting their parliamentary performance to residents, the new aspirants are strictly prohibited from such activities, which are seen as pre-election campaigning."

The CEMC initially ruled that the publication of the list of "unfit politicians" was an act of illegal electioneering. But in the face of widespread opposition, the commission was forced to change its ruling and condone the activities of citizen groups as a presentation of opinions. Angry ULD leaders have demanded that the initial ruling be upheld.

An open rift has taken place between the ULD and the MDP over the issue, which threatens to fracture the fragile ruling coalition. The ULD has accused Kim Dae-jung of plotting to aid the citizen groups and helped publicise their lists in an attempt to discredit the ULD and strengthen the political position of the MDP. "We see the list as a ploy to weaken the ULD so that the ruling party can turn the general elections into a one-on-one race between the MDP and the opposition Grand National Party," a ULD member said.

Politicians and commentators in South Korea have put the sudden growth in the influence of citizen groups down to many factors including the rapid growth in the country's Internet usage. The alliance has used the Internet not only to publicise its campaign but also to organise protests and sign up new members.

But the sudden emergence of organisations such as CCEJ and CAGE as a factor in South Korean political life points to more fundamental shifts in political attitudes. Many of these groups were first formed under the military dictatorships of the 1980s and were forced to operate semi-legally. In the late 1980s, under pressure from workers, students and others, the regime was compelled to hold elections and permit opposition

"democrats" such as Kim Dae-jung to stand.

After nearly a decade of experiences, firstly with Kim Young-sam and now Kim Dae-jung, South Koreans have become increasingly disillusioned with the "democrats," who have imposed the dictates of big business, in some cases just as ruthlessly as previous military dictatorships.

In the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis, which erupted in 1997 and sent the value of shares and the currency plummeting, the disaffection has only become more widespread as Kim Dae-jung has implemented the IMF's demands. Sweeping changes have led to a sharp social polarisation as companies have benefited with increased profits while the working class and middle classes have borne the brunt of growing poverty and unemployment.

The campaign by citizen groups is a symptom of the widespread hostility among voters to the existing political establishment but its political aims are extremely limited. The alliance is little more than a pressure group pushing the existing political parties for minor reforms to electoral and political legislation. As such it acts to block any deeper examination of the causes of political and social problems, which have their source in the crisis of South Korean capitalism.

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