

South Korean government unravels in the face of mass political protests

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12 June 2008

The conservative Grand National Party (GNP) administration of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak is in disarray little more than three months after taking office. It faces popular repudiation of virtually its entire policy agenda, amid the largest anti-government demonstrations since the final days of the military dictatorship in 1987.

Well over a million Koreans took to the streets in Seoul and 80 other cities and towns on Tuesday evening. The main slogan of as many as 700,000 demonstrators in Seoul was “Out with President Lee”, making clear their rejection of his attempt to appease the opposition by having his entire cabinet offer to resign earlier in the day.

The initial trigger for the unrest was the government’s unexpected lifting in April of the ban imposed in 2003 on US beef imports due to mad cow infections. The announcement on beef imports was made as a concession to the Bush administration during Lee’s first state visit to Washington, where he was seeking to make progress on protracted 18-month negotiations toward a US-Korean free trade agreement that would enhance opportunities for Korean exporters. US negotiators have repeatedly linked a repeal of the beef ban to any trade deal. South Korea was previously the third-largest market for American beef.

To many Koreans, Lee’s decision was a subservient gesture to US corporate interests, made in anti-democratic contempt for public opinion and at the potential expense of their health and safety. Fear of mad cow infections from US beef was subsequently heightened by Korean nationalist groups, who generated a degree of hysteria over the issue with crude anti-Americanism. Accusations were made that the American beef industry intended to dump potentially infected beef in South Korea that it would not sell at home.

Small demonstrations against the decision steadily grew throughout May but rapidly became the focus for discontent over a number of political and social issues. Opposition to US beef imports is now only a component of a far broader movement against the Lee government. Demonstrators on Tuesday chanted against moves to privatise state-owned companies and ban labour strikes; the cost of education;

rising fuel and food prices; an unpopular plan to build a canal across the country; and the GNP’s attempt to shift South Korea into alignment with the Bush administration’s bellicose stance toward the North Korean regime.

The date of Tuesday’s protests, June 10, is the anniversary of the historic 1987 demonstration that began the weeks of rallies, called the “Resistance of June”, that brought down the military dictatorship. Demonstrators openly compared Lee with US-backed South Korean dictators such as General Chun Doo-hwan and Park Chung-hee.

A 33-year-old computer specialist, Lee Hong-taek, told *Washington Post* correspondents: “It is too late to soothe the public with lip service and even fixing the beef issue is too late. The real question is his leadership style.” A 41-year-old office worker said to the Associated Press: “I came to the rally again because Lee has turned the clock back to 21 years ago.”

Kim Sook-yi, a housewife, commented to the *New York Times*: “What he [Lee] did was little different from an old Korean king offering tribute to a Chinese emperor. This time, we give a tribute to Washington? It’s humiliating, bad education for Korean children.”

Lee won the December 2007 election and took office on February 25. He is already polling just 17 percent in opinion polls—the lowest for any president in the first 100 days in office. The rapid collapse of support for his administration only underscores that the main factor in his victory was not support for his agenda, but disillusionment with the so-called “democrats” who had held the presidency since 1993.

Presidents Kim Young-sam (1993-98), Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moon-hyan (2003-2008), were all figures in the pro-capitalist opposition to military rule during the 1970s and 1980s. Far from their ascent to office ushering in a period of radical social and political change, they worked to protect the interests of the corporate elite and suppress working class demands for reform. Since 1998, the consequences of the Asian financial crisis have been imposed on the backs of the Korean masses. Living standards have stagnated or fallen and social inequality

widened. Adding to the alienation, Roh took the deeply unpopular step of committing thousands of Korean troops to the US occupation of Iraq in order to shore up the US-Korea alliance.

In last year's election, millions of people abstained from voting out of disgust with having to choose between Roh and Lee—the candidate of the GNP, the party most associated with the old military dictatorship. The turnout was just 63 percent, compared with 80 percent in the 1997 election of Kim Dae-jung. Lee's victory stemmed primarily from a populist campaign in which he claimed that his experience in business made him more capable of devising economic policies to improve the lot of ordinary people.

Instead, the first months of 2008 have seen conditions steadily worsen. Fuel prices have risen sharply, helping to push inflation to a seven-year high of 4.9 percent last month. Economic growth is slowing and is expected to be only 5 percent for the year. Unemployment is predicted to increase due to a contraction in the construction industry and layoffs by Korean manufacturing exporters affected by the slowdown in the US.

In this economic and social climate, the beef import issue is serving as a lightning rod for well over a decade of pent-up hostility toward the entire political establishment. While Lee's popularity has plummeted, the party of the "democrats", the United New Democratic Party, is also registering less than 20 percent support in polls.

A series of demonstrations and strikes are scheduled over the coming days, deepening the crisis of the Lee government.

Large crowds are expected to turn out tomorrow for a vigil to mark the sixth anniversary of the June 13, 2002 killing of two Korean schoolgirls by a US military vehicle. Thousands of truck drivers are launching a general strike tomorrow over fuel prices. Workers have rejected as inadequate a government offer to compensate them for half the increases. The Korean export industry will be crippled by the action. Unions representing auto workers at Hyundai and Kia are holding meetings today and tomorrow on whether to launch strike action not only against the lifting of the beef import ban, but privatisation and the canal project.

On Saturday, a planned public funeral of Lee Byeong-ryeol is likely to draw large numbers of people into the streets. Lee, a 56-year-old worker, set himself on fire on May 25 during an anti-beef protest and died later of his injuries.

Lee Myung-bak has responded with an element of panic. In the past 24 hours, he has declared that he will make major changes to his cabinet and repudiated key policies of his administration. His spokesman, Choo Yoon-sun, told a press conference yesterday that Lee was delaying "public

corporation privatisations and the pan-Korean waterway project" as they were "adding to the public's concern, amid a flurry of conflicting views over the government's controversial policy tasks".

Choo announced that "the government and the GNP agreed to readjust policy priorities and to focus on bread-and-butter issues". A range of subsidies, cheap loans and concessions were unveiled for truck drivers, small business and low-income earners. Lee is reportedly seeking to appoint Park Geun-hye as the new prime minister. She is the daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee and his rival for the GNP presidential nomination. Park enjoys a degree of support among sections of the middle class and alienated youth.

The broader alarm in ruling class circles over the eruption of discontent is expressed in yesterday's editorials in the Korean press.

The *Korea Herald* declared the "nation is in crisis... comparable to that of the 1997 financial crisis". Protestors, it wrote, "should go back to their homes, workers to their jobs, activists to their original fields of campaign and lawmakers to the National Assembly. They need to watch what the president and his administration do..."

The GNP-aligned *Chosun Ilbo* commented: "People elsewhere must have thought some kind of revolution was taking place in Korea." While stating that the "government is chiefly to blame", it declared "it is high time, however, that the people who took part in the candlelight vigils, too, took some time to think... Should we shake the government more and hurt government functions further, the citizens in general will pay..."

In more than a hint that the state should employ outright repression, *Chosun Ilbo* concluded: "The usual suspects who also led protests against the dispatch of our troops to Iraq, the construction of the Pyeongtaek US base and the Korea-US free trade agreement, have taken over. They use the housewives carrying candles and high school students holding non-violent pickets as foils."



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