

Another huge demonstration demands South Korean president's resignation

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Tens of thousands of South Koreans—half a million according to organisers—defied threats of state repression and marched through Seoul on Saturday in a massive demonstration of opposition to the government of President Lee Myung-bak. The principal demand of the rally, reflected in banners, placards and chants, was “Lee Myung-bak out”.

The demonstration filled the streets for kilometres. It was peaceful and there were no reports of arrests. Following the violent clashes between demonstrators and police the previous Saturday, hundreds of Catholic priests and nuns, Protestant clerics and Buddhist monks placed themselves at the front of the march. Police commanders decided against using the 20,000 riot police present to disperse the rally, fearing that scenes of religious figures being beaten or tear gassed would only further inflame public opinion.

The religious groups and the parliamentary opposition parties—the Democratic Party and the Democratic Labor Party—also formed a human shield between the demonstrators and a barricade of police vehicles blocking access to Lee’s presidential offices. More radical protestors were thus prevented from attempting to push past the police cordon as they had the week before.

The rally was the latest in the virtually daily protests since Lee announced in April that his government was lifting a ban on American beef imports. The ban was imposed in 2003 after a case of Mad Cow Disease was discovered in the US. The anti-government movement has gone far beyond the issue of US beef however. It has developed into a general repudiation of Lee’s entire pro-business policy agenda and a means for Korean workers and youth to vent their pent-up anger over falling living standards, as well as their hostility to US militarism and the Bush administration.

The *Korea Herald* reported that the organisers of Saturday’s protest advanced five demands: “A complete renegotiation of the import deal; stopping distribution of US-produced meat; firing Eo Cheong-soo, chief of the National Police Agency, and Choi See-joong, chairman of the Korean Communications Commission; scrapping major government plans, including the privatisation of public enterprises and

the cross-country canal project; plus talks and an open debate with President Lee Myung-bak”.

The huge turnout has left the entire Korean establishment in a state of bewilderment. Lee had clearly hoped that the police mobilisation the previous week would intimidate people into staying at home. The offices of the protest organisers were raided on June 30 and trade unionists threatened with arrest on July 2 in order to heighten the atmosphere of repression.

Lee’s government had already sought to bring the protests to an end by abandoning the controversial project to construct a canal between Seoul and Busan and suspending its plans to privatise dozens of state-owned companies. It has also introduced limited fuel subsidies for transport drivers affected by rising oil prices and income support for low income earners.

In regards to US beef imports, Korean trade negotiators had, prior to the demonstration, secured a “voluntary” undertaking from American exporters that they will not sell beef from cattle older than 30 months to South Korea. Younger cattle are less susceptible to contracting Mad Cow or Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE).

The failure of both repression and concessions to silence discontent testifies to the tremendous class and social tensions that the anti-Lee movement expresses. The Korean working class has faced declining living standards for the entire decade since the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998. It has been forced by successive governments to pay, in the form of suppressed wages and higher prices, to protect the interests and profits of the major Korean corporations.

Large numbers of working people have survived through the accumulation of ever greater levels of debt. Household debt more than tripled after 1997, rising from 38 percent of GDP to 67 percent by September 2006. At the same time, they have seen military tensions continue to fester on the Korean peninsula due to the Bush administration’s stance toward North Korea. Anti-US hostility has also been fed by the deeply unpopular decision of the previous president, Roh Moon-hyan, to deploy Korean troops as part of the US

occupation of Iraq.

The worsening economic conditions are now plunging millions of people into levels of indebtedness that threaten bankruptcy. Fuel, food and other commodity prices are soaring and interest rates have risen. The Bank of Korea reported in June that household debt surged 9.2 percent to a record of 640.5 trillion won (\$US623 billion) in the first quarter of 2008, compared with 2007. Economic growth is slowing, raising the prospect of a rise in unemployment, especially among young first job seekers.

The hardship and uncertainty gripping large sections of the population, combined with deepening alienation from the entire political establishment, lies at the heart of the volatile reaction to the beef import decision. It was interpreted as evidence that Lee's government was indifferent to the problems of masses of people and concerned only with the fortunes of the corporate and financial elite.

The removal of the beef ban was not justified on public health criteria, but presented by Lee as a masterful concession to restart stalled negotiations toward a US-South Korea free trade agreement. Korean business is desperate to conclude a deal before the Bush administration leaves office. The US Democratic Party and its presidential candidate Barak Obama, serving as the mouthpieces of struggling American auto-makers, have opposed the agreement as it would allow Korean producers greater access to US markets.

Discussion rapidly developed on popular Internet portals that the beef decision was proof that Lee, a former Hyundai CEO, was prepared to feed Koreans contaminated meat to appease the Bush administration and secure a free trade pact. Anti-American sentiment fed into the anti-beef campaign, with conspiracy theories circulating among young people that the lack of human cases of Mad Cow disease in the US was because Americans ate beef imported from Canada and Australia and exported infected domestic product to unsuspecting consumers in other countries.

Other unscientific claims were also circulated such as that Koreans were genetically more at risk of Mad Cow disease; that someone could contract the disease by eating just 0.01 grams of American meat; that Alzheimer's disease was caused by eating BSE-infected beef; and even that babies could be infected by certain brands of diapers as they contained American beef proteins. This despite the fact that there have been no cases of BSE in the US since 2003.

That such assertions were embraced by millions of people can only be understood as a symptom of the tremendous distrust felt towards the political establishment and hostility to its free market agenda. The past decade has shattered the illusion that the rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s would ultimately result in universal prosperity. Instead, social inequality has dramatically widened since

1995.

In 2006, South Korea had a Gini coefficient (a statistical measure of inequality) of 0.31, the same as in 1987, the last year of the country's military dictatorship. A reduction in inequality in the early 1990s has been entirely wiped out by the policies after 1997. Some 55 percent of the Korean workforce is now employed on a part-time or casual basis. By 2006, the top 10 percent of income earners raked in 5.4 times the income of the bottom 10 percent—a ratio higher than the United States.

On Sunday, Lee announced further measures to try and appease widespread discontent. Restaurants, fast food shops, catering services, schools, hospitals and government canteens will now have to label beef to identify its country of origin and the age of the cattle, so consumers can avoid US product if they wish. Over 640,000 venues will be affected.

The government is also stepping up its repressive measures. Arrest warrants have been issued against eight of the most prominent leaders of the People's Alliance for Countermeasures against Mad Cow Disease—an umbrella organisation for 1,700 groups that have been organising the daily protests. Two protest leaders have already been taken into custody. Six others have sought sanctuary in a Buddhist temple.

The real danger, however, is that the movement will dissipate for lack of a clear political perspective. Hostility to Lee has not translated into support for opposition Democratic Party. The *Korea Herald* reported on Monday that polling shows that the Democrats have just 10 percent support—even less than the 17 percent support Lee registers. But alienation and anger against the established parties has not translated into a coherent alternative.

Representatives of the Catholic, Protestant and Buddhist hierarchies in South Korea were just as shocked at the size of Saturday's demonstration as the government. Succumbing to constant pressure from the government, the media and business for an end to the opposition movement, they announced on Sunday that they would not participate in any future protests. The Catholic Priests Association for Justice stated: "Following a meaningful declaration of the people's victory on Saturday, priests stopped fasting and have returned to religious duty." Buddhist groups also declared that they had "delivered the people's message" to Lee and would now "wait and see".



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