

South Korean government bolsters police powers

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Recent violent crimes in South Korea have been seized on by the government to justify granting the police more repressive powers. The new measures include arming officers with tear gas guns and Tasers at all times, and reviving a policy allowing police to stop and search anyone deemed suspicious. The government claims it is trying to prevent crime and protect citizens, but the real aim is to prepare for eruptions of social unrest.

On August 18, a knife-wielding man injured eight people at a subway station in Uijeongbu, in Gyeonggi province. Three days later, also in Gyeonggi province, another man stabbed a bar owner and a customer, before entering a nearby house and attacking the family there, resulting in one death. A day later, a man in Ulsan stabbed a shopkeeper, seemingly without motive. In another case, an unemployed man in Seoul stabbed two former co-workers and other people standing nearby. This spate of stabbings was followed by a particularly shocking crime, involving the kidnap and rape of a seven-year-old girl on August 30.

President Lee Myung-bak's administration has exploited public fears over these incidents to increase police powers, running roughshod over longstanding opposition among ordinary Koreans towards any move to revive anti-democratic measures previously used to suppress demonstrations and strikes.

The National Police Agency last month sent out new directives to police stations and district police agencies, allowing officers to stop and question individuals when they deem that a crime is about to be committed. The questioned individual may be taken back to the police station. These pre-emptive stop and searches will be

used mainly at places with large crowds of people, such as subway stations, and "high-crime" areas, i.e. typically poor, working class centres.

These kind of searches were significantly curtailed in 2010, following a warning from the National Human Rights Commission. They had previously been used by police against political demonstrations.

An unnamed National Police Agency official told the *Korea Times*: "The random checks are aimed at preventing violent crimes, so they won't be conducted indiscriminately at rallies, as in the past. We also don't plan to keep tallies of the number of random checks so that officers don't feel pressured to compete for better performances."

There is no reason to accept these claims. By stationing officers near subway stations, the police can intimidate people going to or from demonstrations. As happened before, police will easily be able to declare protesters potentially violent criminals and subject them to intrusive searches.

The government has also moved to employ another 1,000 police officers and 250 probation officers nationally. Most of these new recruits will be assigned to helping monitor and track people previously imprisoned for violent crimes, including through the use of electronic anklets. The government has insisted that sex offenders will be the subject of the stepped up surveillance measures, but the Ministry of Public Administration and Security stated that those convicted of any other violent crimes such as robbery or arson could also be targeted. Given that any sort of anti-government protest can be officially deemed "violent",

these methods may soon be used against workers and young people arrested during demonstrations.

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency (SMPA) now requires all its patrol units and riot squads to carry tear gas guns and Tasers at all times. Previously, the police agency only required officers to carry firearms, tear gas guns and Tasers depending on the situation. The change has been publicly justified as necessary for police to be able to quickly subdue violent criminals.

Arming officers with tear gas has particular political implications in South Korea. In the 1980s and 1990s, under the US-backed military dictatorship and subsequent Democrat administrations, the police used tear gas with such frequency against working class and student protesters that the gas was dubbed “Seoul perfume.”

In 1999, the use of tear gas was discontinued. Government and police officials stepped up their demands for its reintroduction in 2008, after protests and workers’ strikes against the importation of American beef amid fears of mad cow disease. Liquid tear gas was used in 2009 against workers occupying a Ssangyong Motor factory, and again in 2011, against protesters opposing the dismissal of shipbuilding workers in Busan.

Now the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency is purchasing tear gas guns for 23 patrol squads and 75 riot squads in the city. At the same time as the SMPA announced the new tear gas policy it stated that a greater police presence would be maintained in politically sensitive areas, including in Gwanghwamun, where the US Embassy and a number of government buildings are located, and Yeouido, home to the National Assembly and many financial firms. This statement exposed the fraud that the new police measures are simply aimed at “preventing crime”.

The export-dependent Korean economy is being hard hit by the world crisis, and millions are suffering from rising unemployment and economic hardship. As it prepares to impose new burdens on workers, the country’s ruling elite is building up the police

apparatus to suppress any opposition or resistance.



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