

South Korean security agency arrests opposition party officials

Ben McGrath
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Amid a scandal engulfing South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), the agency suddenly raided the home and office of opposition Unified Progressive Party (UPP) lawmaker Lee Seok-ki on Wednesday, and detained three of his associates. The UPP advocates a limited program of social reform and is connected to various trade unions.

Lee has been accused of planning an armed revolt against the government, on behalf of North Korea, violating the National Security Act. According to the NIS, Lee, along with 140 other people, organized the plot in May with the intention of destroying infrastructure.

Other political activists connected to the UPP were also targeted. In total, 18 locations were raided, including the offices and homes of Kim Hong-yeol, chief of the UPP branch in Gyeonggi Province, and the office of Lee Young-choon, chief of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in Goyang-Paju, in northern Gyeonggi Province.

The NIS followed up Wednesday's raids with another on Thursday, targeting Lee's office at the National Assembly. Rejecting the accusations, Lee declared: "What the NIS and prosecution have said is sheer fabrication and lying."

UPP chairwoman Lee Jung-hee accused the government of seeking to restore the "yushin" era methods of anti-communist witch-hunts. This is reference to the US-backed military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee—father of Park Geun-hye, the current South Korean president.

The raids occurred just as the NIS is mired in a major scandal, after it was revealed that the agency interfered in last December's presidential election, in favour of the ruling Saenuri Party—the party of the military dictatorship. A series of protests have been held in

recent months against the NIS, including a rally of 50,000 people in Seoul on August 10.

The main opposition Democratic Party (then known as the Democratic United Party) received a tip last December, leading to revelations that at least nine NIS psychological warfare agents had created hundreds of online IDs. These were used to post comments critical of opposition candidates on web sites and track the activity of opposition supporters.

The program, ostensibly aimed at countering North Korean propaganda, generated upward of 10,000 comments from 2009, with 1,700 related to domestic politics, according to South Korean prosecutors. Democratic Party presidential candidate Moon Jae-in, the UPP and independent candidate Ahn Cheol-soo were all targeted between September and December, in violation of election laws requiring government employees to remain neutral.

Behind the program was NIS director Won Sei-hoon, who was forced to resign in March. In June, Won was indicted for violating the Public Official Election Act. He has since been charged with corruption and bribery. Won is a close associate of former President Lee Myung-bak, having served as vice-mayor of Seoul while Lee was the mayor before becoming president. Won headed the NIS from 2009.

As in the US, where "terrorism" is used as a catch-all to justify police-state measures, the "threat" of North Korea has long been utilized used to attack democratic rights in South Korea. Won reportedly stated during a meeting in June 2012: "Leftist followers of North Korea are expanding their activities in the National Assembly and in every area of society... Every employee must make sure that the NIS fulfils its purpose by preventing the leftists from endangering South Korean society."

The NIS has undoubtedly manufactured the UPP's supposed "plot" as a means of diverting attention from the election scandal. More fundamentally, however, the scare about "leftists" reflects deep concerns in ruling circles over the rising social tensions being produced by the country's deteriorating economy.

The forerunner of the NIS was the notorious secret police known as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), created by the military dictator Park only a few weeks after his 1961 coup in order to solidify his grip on power. The KCIA was responsible for bribing, intimidating, kidnapping and torturing those opposed to Park's nearly two-decade long regime. KCIA director Kim Jae-gyu ultimately assassinated the dictator in 1979, in a bitter dispute over how to suppress mass unrest by workers and students. Following Park's death, the KCIA was renamed the National Security Planning Agency.

In the late 1980s, amid a strike wave by workers and protests, the dictatorship was formally dissolved and elections allowed. However, the police-state apparatus built up under the military dictatorship has remained largely intact, including under Democrat presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.

President Kim Dae-jung, who had been kidnapped by the KCIA in 1973, changed the agency's name to the NIS in the early 2000s. He continued to allow extensive NIS operations, including wiretaps and surveillance on politicians, newspaper editors, chaebol executives and trade union officials. "Legal" wiretaps reportedly increased under the administration of Roh Moo-hyun—once a "human rights" lawyer opposed to the former military dictatorship.

Kim and Roh presided over the pro-market restructuring of the South Korean economy following the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis, ending the life-long system of employment and decimating jobs and conditions. Their administrations opened the door for the return of the right-wing Saenuri Party and the administrations of Lee and Park, which deepened the assault on the working class.

The Saenuri Party clearly has many connections to the NIS and will exploit its allegations for its own political purposes. But the return to the provocations and repressive measures of the military dictatorship has a much wider significance. Whether the right-wing Saenuri Party or the so-called Democrats are in power,

the ruling class in South Korea is determined to impose the brunt of the economic crisis onto the working class and will not hesitate to use dictatorial measures to suppress any resistance.



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