

South Korean opposition lawmaker arrested

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The South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) has arrested United Progressive Party (UPP) lawmaker Lee Seok-ki, accused of planning a revolt to overthrow the government in support of the regime in North Korea. The UPP, which is associated with the trade unions, is part of the political establishment and is the third largest in the National Assembly.

A National Assembly vote on September 4, with the overwhelming backing of the ruling Saenuri Party and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), approved the NIS action. Lawmakers are immune from arrest while the legislative body is in session unless sanctioned by the National Assembly. The vote passed 258-14, with 11 abstentions and 6 invalid votes cast.

The NIS carried out an earlier series of raids on August 28 on the offices and homes of UPP and associated trade union officials, claiming that Lee was involved in a conspiracy to carry out armed attacks on infrastructure. The real motive was to whip up a “red” scare to vilify any opposition to the government and justify state repression against demonstrations and strikes by the working class.

The NIS had been mired in scandal, for months after it was revealed that the intelligence agency was posting comments online against opposition candidates in favour of the current president Park Gyun-hye. Park is the daughter of former military dictator Park Chun-hee, who created the forerunner of the NIS, the so-called Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA).

Lee and his colleagues have been accused of leading a group of about 130 people known as the Revolutionary Organisation (RO). However, “RO” appears to be just the general acronym used by NIS on its initial warrants, without any concrete evidence as to the actual existence of such an organisation. This has not prevented the South Korean media from engaging in scaremongering about a “left-wing” coup.

The only “evidence” against Lee comes from

recordings made by an informant on May 12 in which Lee and others allegedly voice support for North Korea and call on members to gather weapons in preparation for war. Group members supposedly discussed turning BB guns into more powerful weapons.

UPP leader Lee Jung-hee told a press conference: “Out of 130 people in the meeting, one or two people mentioned hijacking arms and destroying infrastructure, which everyone else took as a joke.” Lee Seok-ki has also stated that the comments were taken out of context.

The NIS has reportedly been investigating Lee and his associates for three years, which immediately raises questions about the agency’s actions. Why have they decided to arrest him now? What initiated the investigation? Who else is being targeted?

The arrests are clearly politically motivated. The government and the state apparatus are seeking to whip up a North Korea scare campaign to justify the use of police state measures against any opposition, particularly from workers and youth to rising levels of unemployment and poverty.

A *Joonang Daily* article, citing “government sources,” claimed: “A pro-North Korea faction of the Unified Progressive Party accused of conspiring to overthrow the government hoped ongoing candlelight vigils protesting the country’s top spy agency would boost anti-government sentiment felt during the anti-US beef rallies of 2008.”

In 2008, the initial protests against the resumption of US beef imports became the focal point for widespread opposition and began to voice broader social demands.

The DP’s support for Lee’s arrest demonstrates just how far the “Democrats” have shifted to the right since the end of military rule in the 1980s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Democrats were the target of the KCIA, which was notorious for its anti-communist witch-hunts and its ruthless suppression of any opposition to the

military dictatorship.

The Democrats, however, accepted the bogus pretext for Lee's arrest. DP floor leader Jun Byung-hun stated: "Anti-state forces have threatened the nation. We will fight against any enemy that denies democracy. The DP decided to vote in favor of the arrest motion in accordance with the law and principle of democracy."

The Democrats have also toned down their own limited protests against the election interference by the NIS. DP chief Kim Han-gil, stated: "The DP will separately deal with the NIS' illegal election interference case and the recent revolt conspiracy case."

The UPP itself has mounted no campaign against the arrests. It has accepted Lee Seok-ki's detention, with only a few token words of protest. The UPP leadership has offered to cooperate fully with the government's "investigation," thus giving legitimacy to the charges.

The lack of any opposition in the political establishment to this latest arrest underlines the very fragile character of the very limited forms of parliamentary democracy put in place after the end of the military dictatorship. Amid a widening gulf between rich and poor in South Korea, there is no constituency in ruling circles for the defence of democratic rights. It is a warning that the government and opposition alike are willing to use police state measures against any working class resistance to the imposition of the austerity measures demanded by big business.



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