

South Korean government demands dissolution of opposition party

Ben McGrath

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After weeks of threats, the South Korean government has filed a motion to ban the third largest party in the National Assembly, the United Progressive Party (UPP). The move represents a far-reaching attack on basic democratic rights and is entirely based on bogus charges that the UPP was involved in an armed plot against the government on behalf of North Korea.

On November 5, President Park Geun-hye's administration sent its request to the Constitutional Court, calling for the UPP to be dissolved and for an interim order suspending the party's political activities and its six National Assembly members until a decision is reached. The court will have six months to deliberate before making a decision, which requires six of the nine judges to rule in favor of disbanding the party.

The government unveiled the trumped-up charges at the end of August, claiming that the National Intelligence Service (NIS) had evidence of a planned "armed revolt." It accused a small number of UPP and trade union members, led by already arrested UPP lawmaker Lee Seok-ki, of forming a "Revolutionary Organization" (RO) in support of North Korea. The only purported evidence is an NIS recording of a meeting attended by Lee and other UPP members on May 12, in which some members appeared to joke about attacking the government with BB guns (low-powered air guns).

The allegations against the UPP first appeared in the middle of a damaging scandal about NIS interference in last December's presidential election, during which the intelligence agency used its agents to post online comments favorable to the current president.

More recent revelations in October involve the military's Cyber Command, a cyber-warfare division ostensibly used to counter North Korean activities on the Internet. Last month, investigators raided Cyber

Command after opposition lawmakers alleged it carried out political activities similar to the NIS by conducting an online smear campaign against opposition presidential candidates.

The request to illegalise the UPP is the first in the history of the Constitutional Court, established in 1988. It would be the first such ban since 1958 when US-backed dictator Rhee Syng-man outlawed the Progressive Party of presidential challenger Cho Bong-am. Rhee had Cho arrested for violating the National Security Act and executed him a year later on charges of espionage. Cho's guilty verdict was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2011.

Justice Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, stated: "We have determined that the UPP's platform and its objectives are intended to favor North Korean socialism, which goes against the free democratic basic order of our Constitution and that the activities of the RO (Revolutionary Organization) which forms the party's core, were in line with North Korea's strategy to revolutionise the South."

The economically stricken North Korean Stalinist regime has nothing to do with genuine socialism or communism. And the UPP is a reformist, trade union-based party, whose program is critical of the government's hard-line stance toward Pyongyang only because it favors opening up North Korea as a new cheap labour platform for sections of South Korean business.

Hwang's rhetoric resurrects the Cold War anti-communist witch-hunt tactics used by the previous dictators, such as Rhee and President Park's father, Park Chung-hee, to suppress political dissent. The NIS, created by the senior Park and then known as the KCIA, has a notorious history of ruthlessly silencing political dissidents through assassination, kidnapping

and intimidation.

The increasingly overt illegal operations by the NIS and other secret agencies in recent years are part of a shift within the South Korean ruling elite to prepare for a return to authoritarian rule. It takes place under conditions of a widening gap between rich and poor, deepening global economic turmoil, and the growing danger of war on the Korean Peninsula caused by the provocative US “pivot to Asia” to militarily confront China.

The investigation surrounding Lee Seok-ki and the supposed RO is continuing. The demand to disband the UPP comes shortly after the government revoked the legal status of the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union. The union, which claims to represent some 60,000 teachers, is a UPP ally. The government alleged that some 40 teachers participated in the RO meeting on May 12.

The UPP, in conjunction with the Democratic Party (DP), the main opposition party, held protests throughout the summer and fall against the government’s election interference. These demonstrations were designed to allow workers and students to vent their anger against Park Geun-hye’s ruling party and to subordinate the opposition to the DP.

Founded in 2000, the UPP—then known as the Democratic Labor Party—worked as a “left” appendage of the Democrats. Initially set up as the political wing of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), it later formally split with the KCTU but the two remain allied. The KCTU has played an important role in strangling workers’ struggles while the DLP/UPP’s main function has been to divert workers back toward the Democrats in elections. In December 2011, the DLP merged with smaller groups to create the UPP and then supported the DP in both the general and presidential elections in 2012.

In response to the moves to ban it, neither the UPP nor its allies in the trade unions have appealed to the working class for support but engaged in cheap stunts. On November 6, for example, five UPP lawmakers shaved their heads in protest outside the National Assembly building.

The Democratic Party has not criticised the bogus charges against the UPP. Instead, it has given them de facto support. DP spokesman Kim Kwan-young stated:

“It is very regrettable that an unfortunate situation, unprecedented in our constitutional history, has occurred. We hope for a responsible and wise decision from the Constitutional Court justices, based on historical awareness.” In other words, the Democrats are prepared to accept whatever ruling the court hands down.



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