

South Korean president carries out cabinet reshuffle

Ben McGrath**21 June 2014**

South Korean President Park Geun-hye is undertaking a major shakeup in her administration in a bid to deflect mounting public anger over its handling of the Sewol ferry disaster in April, and more broadly over rising social inequality.

Families of the Sewol victims and their supporters began voicing their frustration with the Park administration almost immediately after the accident occurred. Many of the 304 dead and missing were school students. Prime Minister Chung Hong-won resigned, less than two weeks after the ferry sinking, to give the impression someone was being held accountable. Mun Chang-geuk was selected to take Chung's place.

However, Chung's resignation did little to halt anti-government sentiment. Park pledged in May to disband the Korea Coast Guard and reorganize the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries and the Ministry of Security and Public Administration. Presidential spokesman Min Gyeong-uk stated that Park was considering changes to her cabinet.

Park made the reshuffle official on June 13. "The President named new seven ministers including deputy prime minister and finance minister to fulfill imperative missions of grand, national reform and public safety; successfully achieve the three-year economic innovation plan and; aggressively pursue reform in education and society and culture," Min stated.

Choi Gyeong-hwan was nominated as finance minister. Kim Myeong-su was appointed educational, social and cultural affairs minister as well as head of the Ministry of Education; Jeong Jong-seop as the head of Security and Public Administration; and Choi Yang-hui as science, ICT, and future planning minister. Jeong Seong-geun became culture, sports and tourism minister; Lee Gi-gwon the employment and labor

minister; and finally Kim Hui-jeong the gender equality and family minister.

The cabinet changes have nothing to do with improving public safety or preventing future tragedies. Park is seeking to consolidate her power and push forward with an agenda of privatizing state entities and suppressing resistance through the dissolution of trade unions and opposition political parties.

Park immediately ran into problems when her first nominee for prime minister, An Dae-hui, was forced to step aside over corruption allegations. Her second choice for the post, Mun, has fared little better. He has come under fire by the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) over a series of issues, including comments apparently justifying Japanese colonial rule of Korea.

Mun is also facing pressure from within the ruling Saenuri Party to withdraw his nomination. On Thursday, however, Mun stated his intention to prepare for a coming confirmation hearing at the National Assembly. President Park said she would review whether to proceed with Mun's hearing when she returns from Central Asia this weekend.

Whoever is finally installed as prime minister, the Park administration will intensify the assault on the living standards of the working class. Park's nominee for finance minister, Choi, who would also serve as deputy prime minister, confronts a slowing economy and falling exports. In May, exports dropped by nearly 1 percent. Exports to China, South Korea's largest trading partner, fell by 9.4 percent.

Upon his nomination, Choi stated: "Consumer sentiment was hit hard by the unexpected Sewol ferry tragedy. I feel responsible for reviving the flagging economy. I will work to get support from economic officials to push forward stimulus packages." But the

push to boost domestic consumption is being undermined by rising unemployment.

A Statistics Korea reported showed in May that the unemployment rate is three times higher than the official rate of 3.9 percent. Including those underemployed or who have stopped searching for work, the actual rate stands at 11.1 percent, or 3.15 million people.

Social inequality is also growing. A March report from the Asia Development Bank showed that inequality in South Korea had risen at the fifth fastest rate out of a total of 28 nations between 1990 and 2010.

A massive transfer of wealth has taken place to the top 10 percent of the population. This upper stratum controlled 35 percent of wealth in 2000, up from 30 percent in 1979. By 2012, this share had risen to 45.5 percent, according to Professor Kim Nang-nyeon of Dongguk University.

The opposition Democrats, now part of the NPAD, are also responsible for the pro-market restructuring that widened the gulf between rich and poor. The Democrat administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun oversaw mass privatizations, the elimination of lifetime employment and the funneling of workers into low paid, casual positions. Recent figures show that casual workers make up approximately 46 percent of the workforce.

Whereas the Democrats relied on the trade unions to suppress opposition from workers to their regressive agenda, Park's government is openly attacking the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), an NPAD ally. In particular, the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTU) has been targeted for disbandment.

Education minister nominee Kim Myeong-su made clear his support for the union's dissolution, saying that it is "only natural to strip the KTU of its legal status." He continued: "Above all, educational workers should never participate in politics and they should not comment on state policies on education."

Park attempted to disband the KTU last fall but was temporarily prevented from doing so following a court decision in the KTU's favor. On Thursday, however, the Seoul Administrative Court upheld the government's declaration of the union as illegal. The KTU immediately stated it planned to file an appeal and an injunction against the decision.

The KCTU does not defend the rights of workers or their conditions. The unions have backed the government's privatization plans, only offering token words of opposition while suppressing any resistance by workers. The KCTU's main objective is to preserve itself. Following a police raid on KCTU headquarters in December, the union immediately ended a 22-day long railway strike on the government's terms.



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