Former intelligence chief in South Korea jailed

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South Korea's former intelligence chief Won Sei-hoon was sentenced to three years in prison on Monday for his role in influencing the outcome of the 2012 presidential election. The conviction is another in a growing list of scandals that plagued President Park Geun-hye since coming to power and raised further questions about the legitimacy of her rule.

Won was convicted of violating the Public Official Election Act by ordering subordinates to post at least 274,800 comments on internet message boards and social media prior to the 2012 election. Of that number, 110,000 posts were illegal, as they came after Park became the Saenuri Party's presidential candidate. In South Korea, it is illegal for government officials or agencies to campaign or intervene in elections in any way. Won was head of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) from 2009 to 2013.

Park was elected on December 19, 2012, narrowly defeating Moon Jae-in by 3.5 percent. Moon ran on the Democratic United Party (DUP) ticket, which now goes by the name of New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD). President Park has not issued a statement on Won's conviction.

The comments smeared opposition presidential candidate Moon as well as independent Ahn Cheol-soo, who dropped out of the race to back the DUP. The posted messages accused Park's opponents of, among other things, being "servants" of North Korea. The verdict of the Seoul High Court read, "The agency's cyber-activity interfered in the public's decision-making while neglecting its duty to keep political impartiality, which is required by law."

Monday's ruling overturned a lower court decision declaring that Won had interfered in the election but had not supported any particular candidate. He had previously received a two and a half year prison sentence, suspended for four years last September. Won was taken into custody immediately following the High Court's decision. He declared, as he was being led away, "I thought I was working for the good of the country and the people."

Won was a close ally of former President Lee Myung-bak. Following the 2007 presidential primary for the Grand National Party (the former name of the Saenuri Party) in which Lee edged out Park for the party's nomination, two factions emerged within the GNP; one pro-Lee and the other pro-Park. Park's 2012 presidential campaign was not only directed against Moon and the Democrats, but also against Lee, whose popularity had plummeted to around 20 percent range by that time.

Won is being used as a convenient scapegoat to protect the NIS and distract attention from its anti-democratic activities. No-one else involved in the scandal has received jail time. Two former NIS officials received suspended one and a half year jail terms. Kim Yong-pan, the former Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency chief, was accused of obstructing the investigation into the intelligence agency, but was recently cleared of those charges.

The investigation and conviction of Won undoubtedly removes a political rival of the pro-Park faction, while allowing the government to limit the political damage already caused by the issue. Park's administration has been dogged by scandals throughout her two years in office. South Korean presidents serve a single, five-year term and cannot seek re-election.

Throughout the summer of 2013, large-scale protests took place against the NIS's actions, organized by the Democrats and their allies in the now banned Unified Progressive Party (UPP). The Democrats exploited the issue to rally support after major losses in the general

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and presidential elections the year before.

In April 2014, public anger erupted over government inaction over the sinking of the Sewol ferry, which killed 300 people, mostly high school students. Once again the Democrats exploited this sentiment to try to boost its support in local elections last June. As a result of these scandals, Park's approval rating has steadily fallen to 29.7 percent as of last month.

Park sought to protect the NIS last year by concocting a red scare involving the UPP. The intelligence agency claimed to have uncovered a plot led by UPP National Assembly member Lee Seok-ki to stage a revolt against the South Korean government in the event of war with North Korea. The Democrats quickly separated themselves from their one-time ally and the protests against the NIS fizzled out.

The phony plot provided the pretext for Park's government to demand the dissolution of the entire UPP. The Constitutional Court approved the decision last December, marking the first time since 1958 a political party had been disbanded in South Korea. The episode is a clear warning of the police-state measures that will be used to suppress any resistance by workers and youth to ongoing attacks on living standards.

The National Intelligence Service has a long and filthy history in South Korean politics. It was founded in 1961 by Kim Jong-pil as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). Its purpose was to assist Park Chung-hee, the father of current President Park, in solidifying his dictatorship after seizure of power in a military coup that same year.

Over the next 18 years, Park used the KCIA to terrorize political opponents, engaging in kidnappings, torture, and murder. After his own assassination in 1979 by KCIA chief Kim Jae-gyu, the agency underwent cosmetic changes, becoming the Agency for National Security Planning in 1981 under Park's protégé Chun Doo-hwan. It was maintained after the military dictatorship formally ended in the late 1980s and was renamed the National Intelligence Service in 1999 during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung.

However, the NIS continues to be the bastion of reaction that it was when it was first established. South Korea's first Democrat president, Kim Dae-jung, like his predecessors used the intelligence service to spy on political opponents as did his successor President Roh Moo-hyun, also a democrat. Now under Park, its ruthless police-state methods are being openly revived and will in the future be used against the working class.

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