

South Korean government pushes new anti-democratic laws

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South Korean President Park Geun-hye and the ruling Saenuri Party are seeking to utilise the attacks in Paris on November 13 to rush through the National Assembly five stalled “anti-terror” bills that will strengthen the powers of the state apparatus to deal with rising workers’ struggles and political discontent.

The five bills include the Terrorism Prevention Act, which would establish a “terrorism control center” under the National Intelligence Service (NIS)—the South Korean equivalent of the US CIA—where it could gather information on South Korean citizens. Another bill, the Cyber Terrorism Prevention Act, would establish another agency under the NIS for the express purpose of monitoring online communication.

The government claims that 10 people in South Korea have expressed support for ISIS, necessitating the Internet-related bill. Even if this claim is true, the government is setting out to criminalize speech that can be interpreted in any way as support for a targeted cause or organization, with wider implications for basic democratic rights. The cyber terrorism bill also contains a provision stating that individuals who report “terrorist plans” can receive monetary rewards, encouraging people to become government informants.

The other bills would require telecommunication companies to install monitoring equipment on cell phones and cooperate with government investigations upon request. Targeted individuals would also be unable to trade in foreign currencies and could be barred from entering the country. Revisions to an existing law would allow the authorities to track the location of cell phones via GPS.

While the Saenuri Party claims the bills would protect the country, in reality, they would strengthen the re-emerging police state, the foundations of which continue to exist despite limited “democratization”

since the late 1980s.

Saenuri Party leader Kim Mu-seong, stated recently: “Just as the entire world has taken action to eradicate IS hiding behind masks, we should also root out illegal demonstrations hiding behind masks and end this vicious cycle of lawless chaos.”

This amalgam between IS and “illegal demonstrations” must be taken by working people as a serious warning. As economic conditions in the country continue to deteriorate, the government is making clear that it will not tolerate any opposition to its pro-business policies, which will reduce the working class to a low-paid, casualized workforce.

Protestors, strikers and even people merely posting comments critical of the government online, will face monitoring and possible persecution. South Korea’s current defamation law is regularly utilized to prosecute those voicing anti-government sentiment. In the eyes of the South Korean bourgeoisie, the struggle for the right to a decent livelihood at the expense of corporate profits is akin to terrorism.

The opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), no less than the Saenuri Party, supports the police-state measures, despite its mild criticisms of the government and the NIS. “We can’t possibly agree on the legislation that would allow a bigger role for the controversial spy agency (the NIS),” Choi Jae-cheon, leader of the NPAD’s policy committee, said recently, but then added: “We will find a way that Cheongwadae’s National Security Council (NSC) could lead the counter-terrorism mission because it has legitimacy under the Constitution.” Cheongwadae refers to the president.

This is a blatant deception. The NSC is comprised of the NIS and other security agencies that could equally implement the anti-democratic measures contained in

the current bills. The NSC was first established under General Park Chung-hee, the father of current president Park, to strengthen his grip on power following his 1961 coup. While the body has undergone changes over the years, Park Geun-hye has bolstered the NSC since coming to office, establishing the Office of National Security in 2013 to centralize control over defense, foreign affairs and other security matters.

Following a large anti-government protest on November 14, which was met with police violence, including the use of chemical-laced water cannons, the ruling party and media have stepped up their campaign against workers and students, which includes these five bills. There are plans to drastically alter labor conditions in favor of big business by allowing companies to fire employees at will, as well as a push to re-write history textbooks to glorify past dictatorships.

These moves have met with broad public opposition. Government employees, including teachers, have been vilified and threatened with legal action for their opposition to the attacks on education.

Last Saturday, the Seoul Metropolitan Police raided 12 offices of unions belonging to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), including the KCTU headquarters, in response to the November 14 protest. Police seized documents, computer hard drives and items they claimed were used to attack police.

An arrest warrant has also been issued for KCTU head Han Sang-gyun, who previously took refuge in Seoul's Jogye Temple, a Buddhist place of worship. Warrants for Han's arrest were issued earlier in relation to other so-called illegal protests.

The last time that the police raided KCTU offices, in 2013, was in order to arrest union leaders and workers during a major railway strike, when workers challenged the government over privatization. The KCTU quickly called off the strike in response.

While public officials and media accused the November 14 protestors of violence, the government itself and the police provoked clashes. Before the protest, Justice Minister Kim Hyeon-ung made clear the slightest excuse would be seized upon to suppress the rally. Furthermore, the police stated they would use any means to disrupt the demonstration, including placing buses as barricades, a practice previously ruled in violation of the law by the Constitutional Court.

Many people are still angry over the methods used by police, particularly against Baek Nam-gi, a 69-year-old farmer who was critically injured. Baek, who required emergency brain surgery, was struck by a water cannon blast, fell backward, and was knocked unconscious. Despite attempts by other protestors to rescue him, the police kept firing.

Afterwards it was revealed that the water cannon had been calibrated to fire at ten atmospheres of pressure. The police were warned previously that was extremely dangerous to use more than seven atmospheres of pressure on people within 20 meters, which was the case with Baek. Speaking to the *Korea Times*, a private water cannon operator stated: "Such pressure should not be used against human beings."



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