

South Korea's opposition splits ahead of general election

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South Korea's main opposition party has rebranded itself following several high-profile defections from its ranks in recent weeks. The departed politicians are also set to launch a new political party in time for the general election this spring. Neither party will represent any significant departure from their past pro-business agendas.

Kim Han-gil, the former chairman of the Democrat Party and its successor, the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), quit the party on January 3. He is the second former NPAD leader to do so, after Ahn Cheol-soo left on December 13. Kim and Ahn shared the leadership of the NPAD from its inception in March 2014 until July that year.

Han officially announced on January 7 that he would join the new party being formed by Ahn. Other lawmakers are expected to sign up as well, seeking to posture as defenders of working people. "We have agreed that the goal of the new party is to put the livelihoods of the people first, narrow the wage gap and evenly improve the quality of the people's lives," Han said.

Shortly before Han's departure, the NPAD changed its name to the Together Democratic Party, or the Minjoo Party of Korea (MPK). South Korea's political parties regularly change their names before major elections in the hope that workers will forget their previous anti-working class policies.

MPK leader Moon Jae-in, who clashed with his former colleagues, used the change to try to solidify his control of the party. "I will no longer tolerate any talk on my possible resignation," he stated at the end of last year.

Ahn quit the NPAD after issuing an ultimatum to Moon to call a convention to elect a new party leadership. Kim similarly quit after demanding Moon

resign. While claiming to want "reforms" within the party, the demands were part of factional maneuvers by those who felt marginalized from power.

A second potential rival to the new MPK comes in the form of Cheon Jeong-bae, another former NPAD member, and his own new party, the National Congress. Cheon left the NPAD in March 2015 and captured a National Assembly seat as an independent in the April by-election in Gwangju, a traditional NPAD stronghold.

While there was speculation Cheon might also ally with Ahn, for the moment, he is keeping his distance. "It would be a problem if Ahn joins those who only seek their political survival by leaving the party, those who are far from the value and vision of a new politics," Cheon stated.

The various splits are the result of growing concerns among South Korea's "progressive" politicians over how to deal with the rising tensions in the working class. While these new parties will have few, if any, real political differences with the MPK or their Democrat predecessors, both aim to present an "alternative" to workers.

Over the past two decades, the Democrats and all their incarnations have been discredited in workers' eyes, failing to win support despite widespread hostility toward former President Lee Myung-bak, current President Park Geun-hye and their conservative Saenuri Party. From 1998 to 2008, Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Noh Moo-hyun, both Democrats, oversaw large-scale privatizations and the expansion of the casualized workforce, which their political successors claim to oppose today.

The entire opposition camp, including the trade unions, is also growing increasingly unsure of how to package the ruling class's widely unpopular agenda,

which features the so-called labor reform being pushed by the government and ruling party. The NPAD stated in December that it would work to pass labor-related bills, so long as cosmetic changes were made to them.

These bills would extend the number of years a worker can be in temporary employment from two to four, and expand the number of industries that can hire such workers, creating an increasingly casualized workforce.

On December 30, the government also unveiled guidelines that would allow companies to fire employees at will, while altering labor contracts as they see fit. The Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) approved the creation of the guidelines in September as part of a tripartite agreement, alongside the government and representatives of big business.

Currently, companies can fire workers only as a disciplinary action for a perceived wrongdoing or if a company is struggling economically. This latter provision is a legacy from Kim Dae-jung's presidency, which allowed companies to carry out massive layoffs during the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis. Both the FKTU and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) supported Kim.

Following the government's announcement of the guidelines, the FKTU said it would no longer support the tripartite agreement. "The government and management have made no efforts to deliver on their promises (to include the FKTU in discussions) made during the negotiations," FKTU head Kim Dong-man complained.

The FKTU faced opposition from its own members when it approved the agreement in September, and as workers' opposition grows, clearly felt it needed to change tactics. The FKTU leadership said it would line up with the so-called militant KCTU to oppose the measures.

In reality, both the FKTU and KCTU are seeking to lead workers into a blind alley. On November 14, one of the largest protests in years took place in Seoul, where 130,000 workers, farmers and students gathered to denounce the assault on working conditions as well as the moves to re-write history textbooks to glorify past dictators, including President Park's father, General Park Chung-hee.

The rally was organized by the KCTU, but the determination shown by workers to fight clearly

frightened not only the political establishment, but also the trade unions themselves. While the KCTU claimed it would continue to protest against the labor changes, it has in effect, called off the struggle. Subsequent protests were much smaller in size and no genuine strikes have been launched. Any future actions between the FKTU and KCTU will only be for show.

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