

Opposition party in South Korea hit by corruption probe

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The opposition People's Party in South Korea has been hit by scandal in recent weeks over supposed financial improprieties before last April's general election for the National Assembly. While not directly accused themselves, both Ahn Cheol-soo and Cheon Jeong-bae have stepped down as co-leaders of the party as a result.

On June 8, the National Election Commission (NEC) accused representatives Park Seon-suk and Kim Su-min, and the former party deputy secretary-general Wang Ju-hyeon of accepting kickbacks from two of the party's advertising agencies. Wang supposedly requested 238 million won (\$US202,906) from the companies before reporting the money as election expenses to the NEC in order to receive reimbursements. Park, a former party secretary-general, is accused of being an accomplice to Wang. Kim allegedly signed phony contracts to receive the money through her design company, Brand Hotel.

Wang has been arrested, and both Park and Kim have been questioned by prosecutors, but as legislators are immune from arrest. Kim reportedly claimed she signed the contracts under Wang's orders. None of the three has been found guilty in court.

Even if all the charges are proven to be true, the investigation is a politically-motivated attack on the People's Party and Ahn Cheol-soo, a potential rival to President Park Geun-hye for the presidency next year. Park Seon-suk, whose involvement in the scandal is less than clear, has been a close aide to Ahn since 2012. Ahn has also been linked to Kim, having recruited her as a candidate for the legislature. Such corruption charges are used routinely in the ruling elites to settle political scores or destroy rivals.

Riding the coattails of the People's Party scandal, Chu Mi-ae, a leading member of the Minjoo Party of

Korea (MPK), the main opposition party, was recently accused of nepotism for hiring a relative as a secretary, harming her hopes of becoming party leader at the MPK caucus in August. The practice of hiring family members is common and it is unlikely others were previously unaware of their connection. According to the *Korea Times*, since June 21 more than 20 secretaries related to lawmakers have left their positions, fearing similar accusations.

South Korean politics as a whole have shifted further to the right under President Park, the daughter of former military dictator General Park Chung-hee. While the MPK and People's Party in no way represent the genuine aspirations of the working class or youth, the Park government is attempting to remove all political opposition.

The April assembly election was an upset for the ruling conservative Saenuri Party. The MPK—the Democrats—took 123 seats to the Saenuri's 122. The People's Party, an MPK ally, won 38 seats, giving the so-called progressive block a majority in the 300-seat National Assembly.

As a result of the scandal, Ahn and Cheon Jeong-bae resigned as People's Party leaders on June 29. "Politics is about taking responsibility. I believe I should take all political responsibility for the case," Ahn stated. South Korean politicians regularly step down from such leading positions, claiming to be taking responsibility as a means of deflecting criticism and thus endorse, tacitly or otherwise, the campaign against themselves or their party.

Ahn founded the People's Party last February, after breaking away from the MPK. The party's purpose is to pose as an alternative to the Democrats and Saenuri Party, attracting young people and workers fed up with the anti-working class agenda of the two main

bourgeois parties. Ahn, in particular, gained support from youth before the 2012 presidential election by making mild criticisms of the government and posturing as a political outsider.

Since the April general election, 104 elected candidates have faced charges of wrongdoing—more than a third of the National Assembly members. This number was up from 79 elected lawmakers accused after the 2012 election. The latest charges ranged from spreading false information to bribery. While most charges were dropped, 40 members remain under investigation, up from 30 in 2012.

It is not hard to run afoul of electoral rules, which are used against political opponents, not to conduct clean elections. Perhaps most notably, President Noh Moo-hyun was briefly removed from office in 2004 for expressing hope that his Uri Party would win that year's general election—a minor breach of election law forbidding presidential involvement in campaigning. Noh was also charged with corruption after leaving office, leading to his suicide in 2009.

Under former President Lee Myung-bak, South Korea's spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS), conducted an Internet smear campaign of Park Geun-hye's rivals in the 2012 presidential election, which included the Democrats' Moon Jae-in and Ahn Cheol-soo. Neither Lee nor Park was held accountable. The NIS chief at the time, Won Sei-hoon, was sentenced to three years in jail, but the Supreme Court overturned his conviction. His case is being re-tried.

Like the People's Party today, the now-defunct Unified Progressive Party (UPP) was subjected to similar fraud accusations after the 2012 general election, in which it won 13 seats. The UPP, another Democrats' ally, continued to be hounded, including with claims of supporting North Korea and planning a rebellion. It was formally dissolved in December 2014, the first time a political party had been disbanded in South Korea since 1958.

The April 2016 election results were a setback for the Park administration, which has attempted to force regressive labor reform bills through the legislature that would increase the casualization of the workforce, as well as so-called anti-terrorism legislation to increase government spying operations on the public.

The MPK and People's Party masqueraded as opponents of the bills for electoral purposes, blocking

the labor reform bills for the time being, but allowing the surveillance law to pass. With the corruption scandal, Park is turning to ever-more dictatorial methods to force through its legislative agenda.



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