

South Korean government faces public anger over deadly Halloween crowd crush

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In the week since a deadly crowd crush took place in Seoul, South Korea on the night of October 29, the death toll has risen to 156. More information has also been revealed about the events leading up to the tragedy showing government indifference to the dangers involved.

The tragedy took place in Seoul's Itaewon district, popular for its nightlife. Around 130,000 people had gathered for Halloween festivities, and with movement difficult, a large number of people became trapped in a narrow alley only 3.2 meters in width. By 10:15 p.m., the situation had spiraled out of control, leading to the major loss of life.

While media reports have sought to blame individuals, including accusations that some deliberately pushed people, the deaths were primarily result of inadequate public safety measures and the failure of officials to respond to clear warning signs.

At least 79 emergency calls were made Saturday night prior to the deadly event. According to released transcripts of the first call made at 6:34 p.m., a person described the alley where the crowd crush took place, telling authorities, "I feel like I would be almost crushed to death here because people continued to come up [the alley] even though no more can go down. I barely escaped, but police need to control the area because the crowd is too big." Similar calls came in over the next four hours.

The previous night, people also reported difficulty moving through large crowds in Itaewon. Yet, only about 200 police officers were deployed to the district the next night, and most were not tasked with crowd management.

Underscoring their essential class function, police can be mobilized in huge numbers to suppress strikes and protests. In fact, more than 1,100 riot police were

responding to rallies near the Yongsan presidential offices on October 29, less than two kilometers from Itaewon. An additional 3,700 riot police were deployed against demonstrators that day in other areas of the city.

Acutely aware of broad public anger, the National Policy Agency (NPA) has launched a special investigation into the handling of the disaster. The head of the NPA Commissioner General Yun Hui-geun offered apologies and also pledged on Tuesday for an "independent" body to further investigate police conduct. On Wednesday, special investigators raided the offices of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency, the Yongsan Police Station, which is responsible for Itaewon, and six other locations.

However, an internal NPA report issued on Monday revealed that the authorities were far more concerned with controlling public anger and politically protecting the government than in preventing future tragedies. The report stated, "Some liberal-leaning civic groups are discussing how they will respond to the incident, calling it the biggest tragedy since the Sewol ferry disaster, under the notion that [the Itaewon tragedy] could possibly lead to demand for the current administration to resign."

The sinking of the Sewol in 2014 caused the deaths of 304 people, mostly high school students. The anger over the sinking contributed to mass protests in 2016 and 2017 against then-President Park Geun-hye, who was removed from office for corruption before the protests could spread beyond the control of the establishment parties.

Politicians have also responded with a predictable mix of crocodile tears and faux anger to deflect public criticism. The press reported that President Yoon Suk-yeol of the right-wing People Power Party (PPP) was "enraged" to learn that the police had failed to respond

to the initial emergency calls about the size of the crowds.

Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hun apologized for the tragedy on Tuesday, claiming, “From now on, the [city government] will do its best to remove the danger of safety accidents in places or events where many people gather.”

However, one look at the city and national governments’ response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic shows where they stand on public safety. The lifting of nearly all mitigation and safety measures while 40,000 people on average are still infected with a deadly and debilitating virus on a daily basis demonstrates their indifference.

The main opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) is playing its own role in deflecting public anger. DP leader Lee Jae-myung, who ran against Yoon in March’s presidential election, stated on Tuesday, “What happened in Itaewon is no doubt a man-made disaster, and it was caused by the incompetence of the administration in office.” The DP has demanded the firing of the NPA’s Commissioner General Yun in addition to other government officials.

The DP is simply joining the hunt for convenient scapegoats to deflect public anger and sweep the matter under the carpet, while making at most cosmetic changes. The tragedy in Itaewon was not simply the responsibility of individual politicians, but of an entire ruling class that views public safety as an impediment to big business’ ability to churn out profits.

By branding the current administration as “incompetent,” the Democrats are simply seeking to make political mileage out of the tragedy while covering up the underlying cause—the profit system itself which they defend. In this, they are aided by their allies in civic groups as well as phony “left-wing” organizations, who orbit around the DP and parrot its criticisms of Yoon as incompetent.

The DP’s own history, including initiating the era of supposedly “living with COVID” under the previous Moon Jae-in administration, demonstrates where the party really stands on the issue of safety. Numerous deadly fires, workers’ strikes against unsafe conditions, and the brutal working hours of many public employees under the Moon government show that both parties of big business subordinate the lives of the public to profits.



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