

South Korean government targets democratic rights

Ben McGrath
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In recent weeks, the administration of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has stepped up its anti-democratic attacks on government critics. In language reminiscent of the country's past dictatorships, Yoon has denounced opposition to the government as the result of "communist totalitarianism" influence and "anti-state forces."

The Yoon administration and the ruling People Power Party (PPP) seized on a September 1 event in Tokyo attended by nominally independent South Korean lawmaker Yun Mi-hyang. It was held by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) to mark the 100th anniversary of the massacre of up to 10,000 Koreans in a pogrom following the Great Kanto earthquake. The commemoration included the participation of numerous other organizations in Japan.

Chongryon is aligned with North Korea, which was seized on by the Yoon administration to denounce Yun, a former member of the opposition Democratic Party (DP). The president declared on September 4: "All citizens together must, without regard for political affiliation, respond firmly to anti-state activities that are attempting to shake and destroy the system of liberal democracy." The PPP also submitted a motion for disciplinary proceedings against Yun in the National Assembly.

The scandal is entirely manufactured. Chongryon is one of the two main organizations representing Koreans in Japan, the other being the Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan), aligned with the South. It is not uncommon for Chongryon and Mindan to attend events together, as they did at other memorials on September 1.

The attack on Yun is not simply aimed at one lawmaker. Rather, it reflects far broader concerns in ruling circles about growing opposition among workers

and youth over declining economic conditions, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the US-led war drive against China.

Real wages have been declining since April 2022 amid high inflation. The average monthly real wage for the first half of the year dropped for the first time since 2011. Furthermore, the purchasing managers index for South Korean manufacturing indicates that the sector has contracted for 14 consecutive months, the longest in nearly 50 years. This has been driven by declining exports, particularly to China.

Having no progressive solution to declining living conditions, the government is seeking to blame any discontent on "outside forces" and to discredit socialism. The government is also making clear that it will use force against protests and strikes. While a lawmaker may be sanctioned in parliament, workers will face riot squads and mass arrests in the country. There is a long history of red-baiting tactics against the working class alongside the draconian National Security Act, which makes socialism illegal.

Yoon declared on September 1 at an event marking the 60th anniversary of the Korean National Diplomatic Academy: "Our freedom is now under constant threat. Communist totalitarian forces and their opportunist followers, as well as anti-state forces, are still inciting anti-Japanese sentiment and misleading the public into thinking the South Korea-US-Japan cooperation mechanisms produced at Camp David will put the Republic of Korea and the people in danger."

The August 18 Camp David summit between the US, South Korea, and Japan marked a significant escalation in the war drive against China. It included plans for trilateral war games, expanded military intelligence sharing, and a three-way leaders' hotline to facilitate cooperation in the event of regional "crises."

Yoon has in effect signed up for a US-led war with China behind the backs of the South Korean population. However, his administration is worried that anti-war sentiment will derail these plans as workers are unwilling to participate in such a catastrophic conflict.

In doing so, Yoon has aligned Seoul with the right-wing government of Japan, the imperialist power that ruthlessly colonized Korea from 1910 to 1945. Successive governments, including the current Kishida administration, have downplayed or denied crimes committed against the Korean people during this period. In part, this is aimed at countering widespread anti-war sentiment in Japan.

The Democratic Party has criticized the Camp David summit from a right-wing, nationalist standpoint. On August 21, for example, Park Gwang-on, DP floor leader in the National Assembly, stated, “Many people evaluate the summit as one where the national interests of the US and Japan are visible but not those of South Korea.”

Such statements are not anti-war and only foster divisions between Korean and Japanese workers while obfuscating the danger of a catastrophic world war. Sections of the South Korean bourgeoisie have long used anti-Japanese chauvinism to distract from conditions domestically. In criticizing these statements, the Yoon administration is also working to ensure that the entire ruling class is brought into line with the US war preparations.

Yoon also used his Liberation Day speech on August 15 to denounce “communist totalitarianism” several times, declaring, “[S]till rampant are anti-state forces that blindly follow communist totalitarianism, distort public opinion, and disrupt society through manipulative propaganda.”

He added, “The forces of communist totalitarianism have always disguised themselves as democracy activists, human rights advocates or progressive activists while engaging in despicable and unethical tactics and false propaganda.” In other words, anyone voicing concerns about democratic rights or the danger of war is being branded as “anti-state” and targeted for suppression.

This is not the first time Yoon has denounced opponents in such terms. During the 16-day truckers’ strike at the end of last year, Yoon declared the truck

drivers’ demands for improved conditions was “similar to the North Korean nuclear threat.” Earlier this year, he pledged to restrict the rights to free speech and assembly while accusing the DP-aligned Korean Confederation of Trade Unions of being pro-North Korean.

For all of Yoon’s claims to be defending “democracy,” his government is reviving the police state measures imposed upon the southern half of Korea beginning in 1948 with the US puppet Syngman Rhee regime, which comprised former Japanese collaborators and stooges for US imperialism.

This police state framework has never been abolished. To the extent that a modicum of democratic rights exists within South Korea today, it is the result of workers’ struggles, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, that forced the ruling class to implement reforms to prevent a revolutionary explosion. Those rights are now on the chopping block.



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