

South Korean opposition party leader attacked in assassination attempt

Ben McGrath
5 January 2024

The head of South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) Lee Jae-myung was attacked on Tuesday morning in the southeastern port city of Busan in an assassination attempt. The assailant stabbed Lee in the neck with a modified mountaineering knife and caused a serious injury from which the DP leader is expected to recover. The suspect was detained at the scene.

The exact motive for the attack is yet to be made clear, but according to the Busan Metropolitan Police Agency, the man admitted he intended to kill Lee and claimed he acted alone. He has been identified only as a 66-year-old real estate agent with the family name Kim. The man reportedly approached Lee posing as an autograph seeker before stabbing him, damaging the jugular vein but missing the vital carotid artery.

The incident took place on Busan's Gadeok Island after Lee toured the construction site of a new airport. He was first taken to Pusan National University Hospital for emergency treatment before being airlifted to Seoul National University Hospital for surgery and where he is currently recovering.

The Busan District Court issued a formal arrest warrant for Kim on Thursday, charging him with attempted murder. The police are also continuing to investigate the attack, including if Kim had accomplices, and may release their findings as early as next week. They have searched Kim's home and office in Asan, South Chungcheong Province, approximately 260 km from Busan and have concluded that the attack was thoroughly planned. The investigation has so far revealed that Kim had been following Lee since last June, attending at least six events where the DP leader was present.

While being taken to his arrest hearing, Kim responded to a reporter's question on his motivations

by saying, "Please refer to the eight-page 'justification document' I submitted to the police."

This document has not been made public. Police claim it does not list criminal or political motives, but instead is supposedly filled with several "pedantic" phrases and "abstruse" references to "history."

Without more information, it is impossible to make a definite declaration on the causes and reasons for the attack on Lee. However, it appears likely that politics played a role.

Lee is a significant political figure. In addition to being the leader of the DP, he is a member of the National Assembly, and was the party's presidential candidate in 2022, only narrowly losing to President Yoon Suk-yeol of the right-wing People Power Party (PPP). Lee has also been embroiled in a politically motivated corruption investigation involving numerous accusations. Tuesday's attack took place with the next general election for parliament scheduled to be held in April.

The *Hankyoreh* newspaper reported on Friday that Kim had written in his document: "During the previous government [of Democrat Moon Jae-in], the economy was ruined due to real estate policy failures and humiliating diplomacy toward North Korea. After the Yoon government was inaugurated and Lee Jae-myung became the opposition leader, the DP has dedicated itself to saving Lee. If everything goes like this, the economy will collapse, whoever wins the general elections." Busan police claimed this report was not completely accurate.

The *Hankyoreh* also reported that Kim was likely influenced by far-right elements in South Korea. Kim's nephew told the newspaper that his uncle had frequently attended far-right "*Taegeukgi* rallies" four or five years ago. *Taegeukgi* is the name for South

Korea's flag.

These rallies are notable for their unhinged anti-communism, support for United States imperialism, denunciation of democratic rights, and support for South Korea's past dictators, Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee. They are also marked by calls for violence against their political opponents, all of whom they denounce as "communists."

Beginning in 2016, far-right-wing layers of the political establishment first organized "*Taegeukgi* rallies" in support of then-President Park Geun-hye. Mass protests had developed that year demanding her removal from office for corruption and which were also fueled by Park's growing attacks on the working class.

While these far-right demonstrations have continued, they lack any mass appeal. The organizers within the political establishment however are working to whip up the most reactionary elements in South Korean society, ultimately directed against the working class. If this is indeed the milieu Lee's assailant had surrounded himself with, it is be likely that his actions were in some way politically motivated.

Political attacks of this nature are not unheard of in South Korea. In 2022, then-DP leader Song Yeong-gil was struck in the head with a hammer by an attacker. In 2015, a man slashed US Ambassador Mark Lippert across the face with a knife in Seoul. In 2006, Park Geun-hye was slashed across the face by an attacker when she was head of the Grand National Party, the predecessor of the PPP.

In response to the assault on Lee, the South Korean political establishment has joined together to denounce the act. The Democrats released a statement on Tuesday saying, "We strongly condemn the act of political terror against Lee," while also calling on its members not to draw attention to or mention the assailant.

President Yoon made his first public remarks on the attack at a New Year gathering on Wednesday. He stated, "Terrorism, in whatever form, is more than just an act of harm or crime against the victim. It suppresses human freedom and is an enemy to everyone that seeks a free society. It is an enemy of liberal democracy."

Yoon's supposed concern over the impact on "democracy" rings entirely hollow. During his administration, he has moved to restrict democratic rights while denouncing his political opponents as

North Korean sympathizers in an open appeal to far-right layers in society.

At the same time, violence and killing is increasingly becoming the primary manner in which the ruling class pursues its political interests overseas. Over the past year, Yoon has closely aligned South Korea with the US-led war drive against China in a de facto trilateral military alliance that includes Japan.

It is therefore entirely possible that the Yoon administration and the police will attempt to whitewash the motivations for the attack on Lee and cover up the role of the far-right in mobilizing violence against its opponents.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)