

Large anti-government protests in South Korea

By Ben McGrath
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One of the largest protests in South Korea for years took place in Seoul, Saturday. Workers, farmers and students condemned President Park Geun-hye's administration and its attacks on labor conditions and education, particularly the rewriting of history texts to glorify the country's previous dictatorships.

Organizers estimated that 130,000 people joined the demonstration, defying 20,000 riot police mobilized to block the protest. The government's repressive response highlighted its increasing reliance on police-state measures to protect South Korean capitalism.

During the march, protestors chanted slogans like "Down with Park Geun-hye" and "No layoffs." The government is pushing through bills that are designed to further expand a casualized, low-paid work force.

These measures would allow companies to fire employees at will or alter labor contracts. The pro-government Federation of Korean Trade Unions agreed to the provisions in September during negotiations with the Employment and Labor Ministry and big business.

Other participants protested against government plans to issue state-written middle and high school history textbooks to glorify the past dictatorships of Syngman Rhee and the president's father, General Park Chung-hee. "I made my way [to the protest] to show my objection to the government's plan for history textbooks. A history textbook should not be a script that can be written by a winner," high school student Lee Hyeon-ju said.

The protest—dubbed the "People's General Uprising"—was organized by 53 labor unions and various peasant and student groups, with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the Korean Peasants League playing leading roles. These

organizations, which have close ties with the official opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), have a record of calling limited protests to defuse the pent-up anger of young people and workers over declining social conditions and attacks on democratic rights.

Demonstrations took place in Gwanghwamun area of Seoul, near City Hall, and Cheongwadae, the home of the president. When protestors attempted to march toward Cheongwadae, riot police armed with shields and water cannons attacked them. The water was mixed with chemical irritants, as well as blue dye to identify participants for arrest.

Demonstrators defended themselves from police attacks and attempted to move several police bus barricades by attaching ropes to buses and pulling them away. Various media outlets reported that some protestors were armed with steel pipes and bamboo poles. The meager means with which the protestors defended themselves paled in comparison to the weaponry wielded by the police.

Baek Nam-gi, a 69-year-old farmer, was critically injured after being struck by a water cannon, falling backward, and hitting his head on the ground while pulling a rope attached to a police bus. He required emergency brain surgery and remains unconscious in hospital. Over 500 protestors sustained lesser injuries, according to the KCTU.

Responsibility for the violence lies with the government and the police, who stoked a tense atmosphere even before the protest began. At a press conference last Friday, Justice Minister Kim Hyeon-ung, alongside four other ministers, issued this threat:

"If protestors commit any actions that violate the protocol outlined in the law or that causes harm to

other citizens, no matter how trivial those actions may be, we will respond swiftly and firmly to hold them strictly accountable for it.” In other words, the government and police were looking for only the slightest excuse to use violence.

Vice-Education Minister Lee Young warned state school teachers that they would be punished if they took part in the rally which violates clauses banning them from engaging in political activism.

Thus, Saturday’s protest was designated as illegal before even taking place, belying claims afterward that the police attempted to allow a peaceful demonstration. In addition to the thousands of riot police, some 700 police buses and water cannons were mobilized for the protest.

The police made clear that they would use the buses to create barricades. The buses surrounded protestors, preventing them from leaving the scene. In 2011, the Constitutional Court ruled specifically that this type of police action is illegal.

Reportedly, 51 people have been arrested so far, but that number could rise. The government is planning to victimize those exercising their right to free speech. During the protest, the police made several announcements, such as: “You are causing a serious traffic disruption here, which is illegal under Korean law. We are officially taking pictures of your faces to arrest those who commit illegal acts. Don’t push police officers or beat them.”

The government has been moving to dispense with the trappings of democracy. The plan to rewrite school history textbooks to whitewash the crimes of past military regimes is an ominous warning of what is in store.

The government vowed on Sunday to crack down on further protests, scheduled for December 5. Justice Minister Kim Hyun-woong told a news conference: “These activities were a grave challenge to law and order and public authority, and they will not be tolerated.”

Concerned that the police measures could trigger greater resistance, the United Nations Human Rights Committee said earlier in the month that it was “concerned about the severe restrictions placed on the right to peaceful assembly, including the operation of a de facto system of authorization of peaceful assembly by the police, cases of excessive force, of car and bus

blockades and the restriction of demonstrations held past midnight.”

The opposition NPAD likewise criticized the provocative and violent methods used by police. Spokesman Kim Yeong-rok said: “In creating unfortunate accidents like this, the police have the largest amount of responsibility for the clashes and inciting rally participants with unyielding and excessive responses.” Another NPAD spokesman, Kim Seong-su, blamed protestors, saying: “The presence of steel pipes and ropes in a rally and protest that must be peaceful is regrettable.”

The NPAD has been largely silent on the issues involved in the demonstration. It does not want to risk instigating a larger protest movement, fearful that workers and students will begin to voice demands that the NPAD is unwilling to meet. While the NPAD will try to exploit public hostility toward the government, it supports the privatization and casualization drive no less than Park’s administration and the ruling Saenuri party.

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