

## South Korea's Rollback of Democracy

by George Katsiaficas

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The suicide of former president Roh Moo-hyun on May 23, 2009 has left South Korea in shock. All over the country, tens of thousands of tearful people seek to eulogize and memorialize Roh—to find ways to express their grief and anger. Conservative government politicians were blocked by local residents from joining tens of thousands people who made the journey to Roh's small hometown the day he died. Not only were they refused admittance, many people splashed them with water and chanted that they should get out—shaming them into leaving. Opposition party spokesperson Kim Yu-jeong expressed what is in many people's hearts when he blamed Roh's tragic death on the conservative government's relentless and disrespectful offensive against him: "The people and history know what made the former president do something so tragic."

During his presidency, Roh had often compared himself to Abraham Lincoln. Both men owed their education to diligent home schooling and sought to bring new progressive policies to their countries. While Lincoln's life was taken by an assassin's bullet, Roh's tragic fate is being seen as no less tied to vengeful attackers. A former aide declared, "The late President Roh had appeared to be exhausted from the prosecutors' investigation." Despite many people's outrage with the conservative Lee Myung-bak government's stranglehold on the nation's democracy, police buses encircled a memorial site in Seoul for former president Roh, and riot squads refused to open their cordon of buses, compelling thousands of people bringing incense and prayers to line up through subway stations. Nearly 1,000 police were deployed in front of the memorial at Deoksugung Palace; altogether over 8,000

police were sent into the streets for crowd control. [\[1\]](#)



**Police buses forming a cordon around the Deoksugung Palace on May 23, where a spontaneous memorial for Roh was erected.**

In 2008, South Korea's suicide rate was already counted as the highest among OECD members, but Roh's suicide is the second in recent weeks believed to have resulted directly from MB's pursuit of all who do not march in lockstep with his programs and policies. On May 3, union leader Park Jong-tae, head of Korea Cargo Transport Workers' Union (KCTWU) in Gwangju, killed himself to protest the unilateral firing without discussion of 78 delivery drivers for the Gwangju branch of Korea Express (which has the largest number of labor union members in Korea Express). Labor Minister Lee Young-hee publicly ridiculed Park's suicide, saying at a press conference that he did not think the labor conflict was significant enough to end one's life over. [\[2\]](#)



### Labor leader Park Jong-tae committed suicide on May 3

Despite his status as Labor Minister, Lee has refused to agree to engage in dialogue with the KCTU and KCTWU. Adding that holding talks with groups engaging in “illegal acts” like demonstrations, Lee’s remarks were echoed by President Lee Myung-Bak’s similar refusal to agree to speak directly with trade union leaders. On the contrary, police announced that they have applied for the arrest warrants for seven union leaders who led the memorial rallies for Park Jong-tae in Daejeon on May 6. Ten days later, at least 457 workers were arrested at a demonstration there when 15,000 union members gathered to mourn Park and demand reinstatement of the fired delivery drivers. According to the legal director of the KCTWU, after police recklessly attacked the dispersing demonstrators, they arrested even people who were eating dinner or on their way home. [\[3\]](#)

The new Lee Myung-bak (MB) administration has wasted little time in seeking to roll back the clock of progressive democratic reforms won by South Koreans through decades of arduous struggles. Ten years of progressive administrations under Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun resulted not only in more liberties but also in higher standards of living for many people. Although progressive presidents embraced neoliberal policies, turning more than 50% of all Korean workers into part-timers and thereby creating a widening division between rich and poor, they also legalized autonomous trade unions, worked out a tripartite system (of business, labor, and government) to manage industrial relations, and permitted a wide range of protests. The MB administration seeks to undo many of the policies of its progressive predecessors.

Fifteen days after the inauguration of the MB administration in January 2008, government officials forcibly removed members of a part-time workers’ union from an ongoing sit-in demonstration. The new MB government released leaders of *chaebol* (the giant corporations that control much of the Korean economy) convicted of corruption and imprisoned under President Roh Moo-hyun, stepped up prosecution of immigrant workers who overstayed their visas, and designed a new Seoul police unit of 1,700 specially trained riot police. President Lee plans to replace the 40,000 strong police force filled with military conscripts with a more streamlined version—to which he will add 14,000 more elite men. For many people, this policy, like many others of the MB government, resembles those of disgraced former dictator (and MB’s friend) Chun Doo-hwan. (In this case, Lee’s plan resembles the *Baekgoldan*—white skull corps—established by Chun.)

Under Roh Moo-hyun’s leadership, enormous strides were made investigating tens of thousands of state-sanctioned murders during the Cold War. On the island of Jeju, for example, where more than 30,000 people were massacred beginning in 1948 under the auspices of a US military government, Roh twice apologized and named Jeju a “peace island.” The MB government has reopened the wounds on Jeju by insisting some of the victims were, in fact, communists—and presumably should have been killed then. MB abolished the official

commission investigating Korean collaborators during Japanese colonial rule and marginalized others looking into human rights abuses by past dictators. In August 2008, the government announced its decision to build 11 more nuclear power plants by 2030 and proposed a Grand Canal to cut across the peninsula—both of which have been termed ecological nightmares. When popular protests against his canal scheme forced him publicly to promise not to build it, he nonetheless continues to scheme the project's continuation through a revised "four rivers plan." MB criminalized organizers of peaceful candlelight protests, and ordered his police to search for them even in the car of a high-ranking Buddhist leader in Seoul, leading to protests by more than 200,000 Buddhists.<sup>[4]</sup> He has so brainlessly pursued his own misplaced agenda that high school girls who led months of candlelight protests against his agreement to import US beef without restriction dubbed him "2MB"—the slowest operating speed of a modern computer, as well as a play on his family name, which also means two.



### Candlelight Protests in Seoul, June 10, 2008

Of all the troubling initiatives undertaken by the MB government, none is more unsettling than its offensive against the media. In July 2008, MBC television producers were taken to court for alleged exaggerations in a documentary on US beef imports, and when they refused to show up, over the next ten months, they were arrested one by one as they went about their daily lives (including a bride-to-be planning her wedding). In August, the KBS president was forced to resign—even briefly detained—and replaced with Lee's crony. A friend of the president was named to head Arirang English channel. The 24-hour all-news cable station YTN was sent a new president. When union leaders and members sought to block him from coming to work, police intervened. Union leaders were repeatedly summoned for questioning. Even though they complied four times, they were arrested. The internet also came under close scrutiny. On July 24, Google Korea came under pressure from the government, confirming it had been pressured to delete two pieces of video footage showing the brother of National Police Commissioner managing a hotel that allowed prostitution.<sup>[5]</sup> Minerva, a blogger who had correctly reported on the global crisis and embarrassed the government by revealing its incompetent handling of the economy, was tracked down and prosecuted (although subsequently exonerated). After the government implemented new restrictive requirements for internet postings, in early May 2009, internet writer and poet Yang Hyung-ku was arrested on charges of violating the National Security Law. Yang had posted hundreds of articles, including a few dozen advocating a federation model for Korean unification and Juche thought.<sup>[6]</sup>

The president and his cronies may be free to pressure the media, but when ordinary citizens do so, it is evidently a crime. A citizens' boycott against the country's conservative newspapers (*Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*) was declared illegal, and charges filed against its internet organizers. Their passports were seized. The government's attempt to control the media is so intense that it has criminalized even citizens who hold press conferences. "New Right" ideologues are delighted. Fashioning themselves after US neoconservatives, they revised newly rewritten textbooks that broke ground by denying the role of the democracy movement in the country's progress. The New Right helped produce an "updated" government Korean history video, distributed widely to schoolteachers, which did not include mention of the Gwangju Uprising as part of Korean

democratization. Ahead of a formal investigation, MB's New Right supporters have already labeled the entire 1948 Jeju Uprising communist as part of their more general campaign to revive the "red complex."

One reason for the MB government's attacks on media and revision of history is to cover their new closeness with Japan. For ten years, progressive administrations cultivated ties with China—now Korea's main trading partner. MB seeks to undo that legacy and reorient the country closer to Japan—following in the footsteps of

both Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. Born in Japan where he used the name Akihiro Tsukiyama, MB has personally met every month with the Japanese prime minister. He refuses to tolerate even mild mannered protests against his Japanese friends. On December 10, 2008, the 60th Anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, his government sent six police buses full of riot police to dismantle a peaceful protest by former "comfort women" and their supporters in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul. Although the weekly one-hour vigils have gone on since 1992, the government declared the rally illegal because no one had applied for a permit. Furthermore, the police now insist no demonstration can come within 300 meters of the Japanese Embassy.

On January 12, 2009, at his monthly summit with Japanese Prime Minister Aso, Lee announced that Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, a Japanese company which has ignored demands of hundreds of Korean women to be paid for forced labor during the period of Japanese colonization, was selected to launch a South Korean satellite in 2011. Although Korea's trade deficit with Japan is expected to be above \$32 billion in 2008 and Mitsubishi rejected technology transfer as part of its offer, Lee personally ordered the change in the contract from a Russian company, which had included technology transfer. Lee was reported to be in favor of "strengthening South Korea's economic relationship with Japan to shake off its blow from the global financial crisis."<sup>[7]</sup>

At a time when China is the region's rising economic powerhouse and Japan has been mired in economic doldrums for a decade, Lee rivals Inspector Cousteau in finding clues on how to carry the Korean economy forward. Of course, he is not alone in his adulation of Japan. Others see in Korea a "facsimile" of Japan, "a superior, homogeneous nation uniquely fit among Asians to the tasks of the modern world."<sup>[8]</sup> Cooperating with Japan against North Korea is a shameful action for any Korean patriot, but the president makes no apologies—leading many people to question his loyalties.

Clearly, Lee admires former US president George W. Bush. On April 19, 2008, only a few months after he became president, he visited Bush at Camp David. After driving the presidential golf cart around the compound, Lee promised that evening to lift Seoul's five-year ban on US beef—setting off months of candlelight vigils that compelled him subsequently to modify his capitulation to US demands for unlimited exports. "What he did was little different from an ancient Korean king offering tribute to a Chinese emperor," commented homemaker Kim Sook-yi. "This time we give tribute to Washington?"<sup>[9]</sup>

MB continues to emulate Bush-era policies, even though they have been disastrous for the US and the world economy. After MB's first Minister of Economics was compelled to resign for his incompetence, his replacement has been even more forceful in pushing tax cuts for the rich, privatizing the public sector (including in education and health care), expanding labor market "flexibility" (i.e. part-time work with no benefits), and relaxing business and financial regulations. "MB-nomics" has slashed wages for new employees and seeks to extend the two-year cap for temporary workers as well to shrink current restrictions on hiring of part-time employees.

Not only has the MB alienated North Korea (which recently nullified the contract for the Kaesong Industrial Complex and accelerated its nuclear program), but MB's stubborn imposition of his cronies in high positions has also opened a wide split within the conservative party. True to his nickname, "the bulldozer," MB refuses to compromise with any of his critics—even within his own party. Instead he and the New Right are opening a new era in Korean politics, in which forceful implementation of unpopular and questionable policies runs roughshod over dissent and chews up anyone standing in its path.

On May 20, 2009, during a press conference presided over by Prime Minister Han Seung-soo, the government announced its unilateral decision to discontinue permits for large demonstrations in cities and empowered police to arrest anyone committing the now illegal act of meeting in public. In Prime Minister Han's words, "The government intends to counter illegal strikes and violent demonstrations that could have negative effects on the nation's economy. To reach the level of an advanced nation, it is necessary to correct the backwardness of our demonstration culture."<sup>[10]</sup>

The threat posed by MB to South Korea's economic well being, political progress, and democratic liberties is grave. With little or no opposition in the National Assembly, extraparliamentary forces will continue to mobilize against him no matter how much he seeks to criminalize even the mildest forms of public dissent.

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[1] [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/356813.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/356813.html), accessed on May 25, 2009.

[2] [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_editorial/355642.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/355642.html), accessed on May 25, 2009.

[3] [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/355443.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/355443.html), accessed on May 25, 2009.

[4] For more on the candlelight protests, see "Thank You Korean Schoolgirls!" <http://eroseffect.com/articles/candlelight.htm>, accessed on May 25, 2009.

[5] [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/300711.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/300711.html), accessed on July 27, 2008.

[6] [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/355242.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/355242.html), accessed on May 25, 2009.

[7] *Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 13, 2009 as reported in *Hankyoreh*, accessed on January 15, 2009.

[8] Meredith Woo-Cumings, "Market Dependency in US-East Asian Relations," in Arif Dirlik (editor), *What Is In a Rim?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) pp. 166, 184.

[9] Choe Sang-hun, "Protests in Seoul Galvanize Koreans," *International Herald-Tribune*, June 12, 2008, p. 4.

[10] [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/356066.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/356066.html), accessed on May 25, 2009.