

South Korea - Raids on KCTU, Neoliberal Crisis and Popular Authoritarianism in South Korea: An Explainer

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Editor's Note:

On 18 January, the National Intelligence Service and police raided the headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), invoking the rarely used National Security Act. Within 48 hours, a number of other union offices were raided, and union officers arrested. What happened? And, why did the government raid and attack the KCTU and other unions in such a concerted manner? ALR's Editor-in-Chief, Dae-oup Chang, presents an Explainer.

Q: There was a raid on the headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) on 18 January 2023. What happened, and why?

A: There were in fact two rounds of raids on two consecutive days: a round of raids on the KCTU headquarters and union officials elsewhere on 18 January, and another round of raids of 8 different offices of the construction workers' unions affiliated with the KCTU and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) on 19 January.

The National Intelligence Service raided on the KCTU headquarters. However, it was not directly related to the KCTU itself but only about a union officer of the KCTU. It is reported that he and other union officers, apparently part of a political organisation, are now being investigated by the National Intelligence Service for violating the National Security Act on the grounds of alleged links to North Korea.

Despite the fact that the search warrant for the KCTU headquarters raid was issued only for a particular desk used by the union officer, more than 1,000 riot police were deployed to search his desk for several hours. A press briefing was held by the authorities in front of the building of the KCTU headquarters, and the conservative media in South Korea reported the news as if the entire KCTU violated the National Security Law.

Beyond the KCTU headquarters, the National Intelligence Service and the police also raided the office of the Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union and the houses of other union members. The KCTU confirmed that a total of four officers of the KCTU were targets of the raid.

A separate round of raids on the construction workers' unions is based on an allegation of union

“corruption”. About 20 former and current labor union officers are charged with coercion and intimidation for forcing the companies to hire their union members. The construction companies have been complaining about this practice. A survey by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport that only included the opinions of the construction companies became the basis of the police investigation.

Q: Are these two rounds of raids related at all?

A: They are not directly related, yet they are deeply connected. They are not related directly, because they are separate cases investigated on different grounds. But they are part of a series of concerted attacks on trade unions in South Korea under the conservative Yoon government.

The government learned from its attack on the striking cargo truckers that heavy-handed handling of trade unions is the most effective method to increase the government’s popularity among the conservative segments of the South Korean population.

More fundamentally, the new government from the very beginning had a clear agenda: this is the time to have a real fight against organised labour in South Korea. It was expected that the new government would take serious actions against trade unions. They think that it is important to destroy the militant part of the trade union movement to cultivate an environment favorable for business. They singled out trade unions as the barrier to better capital accumulation and capitalist development.

Q: Has the government used the National Security Act against unions before?

A: The National Security Act dates back to 1948, and until the late 1990s, it had been used to suppress all kinds of social movements - not only the labour movement, but also the student movement. From the late 1990s onward, with the improved human right conditions, it has seldom been used, and only against those who were suspected to collaborate with the North Korean government.

It is worth noting that it was used against the United Progressive Party. In 2013, a Congressman and other individuals who belonged to the United Progressive Party were arrested for conspiracy to commit treason under the National Security Act. As a result, the United Progressive Party was disbanded. That was the last significant use of the National Security Act. The Park Geun-hye government (2013-2017) ruled Korea through what was called “politics by public security”.

However, the National Security Act is likely to be very selectively used only. It is unlikely that the government will use the law to suppress normal trade union activities. However, if they do, it may well ignite deep anger and the formation of broad, anti-authoritarian alliances against the Yoon government.

Q: Is there a history of KCTU leaders being targeted by the state?

A: The KCTU leaders have been targeted and arrested for many reasons since its establishment, but never for violating the National Security Act.

For instance, they have been arrested because they mobilised a demonstration: if a violent conflict breaks out between demonstrators and the police, the host of that demonstration will be charged with violence.

It was the case for the former KCTU president Han Sang-gyun who was arrested for plotting violent riots in 2015. Other KCTU leaders had been arrested for organising illegal strikes and collective

actions. If you are elected as the KCTU president, especially under a conservative government, it's a certainty for you to be arrested.

Q: What are the other ways in which the government has attacked the unions?

A: The government allows or perhaps encourages employers to use financial penalties to suppress trade union activism. An increasing number of employers file lawsuits against the trade unions to make them compensate the company for the financial damage caused by the loss of production during strikes.

President Yoon Suk-yeol spoke of the need for "labour reform" in his New Year's address, but his government is in fact "deforming" labour laws.

It aims to turn things back to the 1990s, if not to the 1970s. After the 1987 democratic uprising as well as the wave of strikes, the rise of independent trade union movements has improved labor rights, which is a major irritant to them.

The conservative government wants to nullify some progressive labour legislations introduced by the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), such as the Serious Accident Punishment Act and the 52-hour workweek. However limited they were, these legislations were regarded as pro-labour reforms. Now they are being challenged.

For example, the 52-hour rule is under scrutiny and likely to be undermined soon by the introduction of the flexible hours system that allows employers to calculate maximum working hours for flexible durations rather than for a week. This will effectively extend working hours up to 80 hours per week in peak seasons.

The government is also preparing a nation-wide campaign to audit trade unions' finances. This and other measures are being carried out under the name of "labour reforms". What they mean by labour reform is getting things back to the good old days of authoritarianism.

Q: There were waves of labour strikes in South Korea last year. To what extent is the labour movement able to push back against these anti-labour measures?

A: The South Korean labour movement at the moment is in a very difficult situation. It is much more isolated now than ten years ago. Although there had been mobilisation by a few unions last year, none of them had successful outcomes. They were not backed by broader, nationwide support. That's the reason why all these strikes ended quickly.

There is always potential for the social movements to build an alliance against this authoritarian government. South Korea was an exemplary case that stopped authoritarianisation. The successive conservative governments from 2007 to 2016 tried to bring the country back to its authoritarian past. That was the general trend all over Asia. But the massive protests by Korean people in 2016-17, including union mobilisations, actually stopped the wave of the authoritarianisation.

Q: How should authoritarianisation be understood in relation to the crisis of neoliberalism?

A: We are living in a period of re-authoritarianisation. Neoliberalism is now managed with authoritarian measures. This is largely because neoliberalism has lost its dynamics. It cannot solve problems caused by itself. The income gaps between the rich and poor became too large everywhere in Asia and beyond. The "invisible hand" cannot bring solutions to contradictions created by the neoliberal economy.

The only thing that political and economic elites can think of is to bring back authoritarian measures. This is the reason why we see the return of authoritarian rule not only in South Korea but globally.

The real danger lies with the fact that these authoritarian regimes are gaining public support. It is because the labour movement and other social movements or progressive political parties have not yet shown an alternative and lack support from the general public.

Ultra-right-wing movements and racist and hate groups are the ones who are enjoying public support, particularly from the desperate, disillusioned and unemployed youth. The crisis of neoliberalism creates a hotbed for popular authoritarianism.

If progressive political parties and labour and other social movements cannot counter this development and offer real alternatives, the future will be grim.

Dae-Oup Chang

P.S.

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