

New mass protest against government, US beef in South Korea

By [Global Research](#)

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SEOUL (AFP) — Tens of thousands of South Koreans marched through the streets here Saturday demanding the scrapping of US beef imports and the resignation of President Lee Myung-Bak, witnesses said.

Waving flags and banners, the thronging crowd slowly snaked through the city centre chanting “Lee Myung-Bak out!,” but there was none of the violent clashes with police that have broken out at some previous recent demonstrations.

Scores of religious leaders including Catholic nuns and Protestant pastors led the march, holding a large banner in front of them, in a calculated move by organisers to prevent hostilities with the thousands of riot police.

Police said the crowd numbered 50,000 but organisers put their estimate ten times higher.

The march followed a mass rally near the City Hall in central Seoul, which was sealed off completely with barricades of police buses, parked tightly and manned by riot police with shields.

Passers-by and vehicles were turned away from the area.

The demonstrations, going back two months, were sparked by Seoul’s agreement in April to resume US beef imports, which were halted in 2003 after a US mad cow disease case.

As Lee’s government struggles to ratify a free-trade pact with the US and in response to the protests, Seoul went back to Washington to negotiate extra health safeguards, and the meat is now on sale.

“Aside from the beef issue, this government fills me with disgust,” a 32-year-old protester who works as a computer programmer told AFP.

“This government has lost public confidence, betrayed people’s expectation for economic turnaround and worsened education problems,” he said as his two young nephews in prams were playing with yellow protest balloons.

The crowd grew as more and more groups arrived after the rain stopped, although generally the number at protests has fallen sharply since 100,000 people gathered in Seoul on June 10, according to police estimates.

An umbrella grouping of activists, the People’s Association for Measures against Mad Cow

Disease, said hundreds of people, including young Christians, would serve as “human shields” to separate the protesters from riot police.

“In order to prevent any violent clashes with riot police, religious leaders, leading activists and parliament members will lead the march,” it said in a statement.

Protesters have previously clashed with police, with more than 200 people hurt in running battles last Sunday.

Supporters of the newly installed conservative government say left-wing professional agitators have been taking over some rallies, a charge denied by the protest groups.

Analysts say beef is not the only source of public dissatisfaction. Policy failures due to inexperience, economic woes deepened by high oil prices and Lee’s alleged authoritarian style have also stoked resentment, they say.

Lee has twice apologised to the nation for his handling of the issue and sacked top aides, but says rallies should now stop.

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