

The Return of Repression. Political Firestorm in South Korea

By [Gregory Elich](#)

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Actions by South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) have generated a political furor that is growing by the day, pitting the ruling New Frontier Party against the main opposition Democratic Party and threatening the existence of the Unified Progressive Party.

The NIS intervened in the election of December 2012 in an endeavor to bring victory to conservative candidates. NIS director Won Sei-hoon ordered the agency's psychological warfare division to launch a campaign to discredit liberal and left political candidates. Agents were instructed to each create three or four posts on the internet per day, praising the ruling party and attacking the opposition. Three teams were tasked to carry out this mission, and one team alone generated an average of 1,200 to 1,600 posts per month. Won was motivated by a paranoid McCarthyist frame of mind, and he was heard to say, "If there is a person or a force which condemns the government and the ruling party, they are no different from North Korea even if they are our citizens."

The psychological warfare teams used IP switching software to prevent tracking. Many of the posts smeared liberal and left candidates as "followers of North Korea." According to South Korean investigators working with the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office, the NIS utilized software to generate millions of automated tweets and re-tweets of their postings, flooding the internet.

In a further boost to the campaign of presidential candidate Park Geun-hye and other conservative candidates, the NIS leaked excerpts from a classified document to the press and to the ruling New Frontier Party, containing a transcript taken from the October 2007 meetings between liberal South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. The excerpts leaked by the NIS dealt with discussions of the Northern Limit Line, the western maritime border between the two Koreas. The NIS intentionally distorted the excerpts it provided and fabricated content in order to make it appear that Roh was offering to turn over South Korean territorial waters to North Korea, expecting the resulting outcry to damage the chances of liberal presidential candidate Moon Jae-in.

The NIS removed a statement from the version leaked to the New Frontier Party, in which Roh stated that the Northern Limit Line should not be changed. In another example, the NIS spliced together a phrase from a morning session with a phrase from an afternoon session so as to misrepresent Roh's position. The NIS also altered words and phrases, and inserted content of its own invention into the transcript in order to discredit the liberal candidates.

Two days before the December 19 election, Kim Moo-seong, head of Park's election campaign, publicly revealed quotes from the fabricated transcript, and angrily announced

that he was “filled with indignation” over its content. His comments received broad media coverage, which helped to swing votes in favor of Park.

It was not until after the election that the extent of NIS meddling was revealed, and Won Sei-hoon was indicted in June. In response to demands by opposition parties that the NIS be reformed, President Park Geun-hye merely asked the agency to come up with a proposal to reform itself. Public anger swelled, and demonstrators packed Seoul Plaza for weekly candlelight demonstrations, calling for the NIS to be brought under control. Before long, candlelight demonstrations spread to cities and towns throughout South Korea, and it was clear the issue would not go away.

The Unified Progressive Party was at the forefront of efforts to reform the National Intelligence Service. In July, I was among a group of international guests who met with members of the Unified Progressive Party, including Representative Lee Seok-ki. A man with an infectious smile, he joked with us that he was the most hated person in the National Assembly. The conservatives loathed Lee for his outspokenness about the need to reform the National Intelligence Service. Nor had they forgiven him for the leading role he played in stopping the nomination of Korean-American Kim Jeong-hoon for a ministerial post in the South Korean government, due to Kim’s service as an advisor to the CIA and as director of In-Q-tel, a technology company that works closely with the CIA. Retribution against Lee Seok-ki would not be long in coming.

As the debate over the NIS in the National Assembly intensified and militant mass demonstrations continued to call for reform, the National Intelligence Service struck back on August 28, raiding the homes and offices of 18 members of the Unified Progressive Party. Three party officials were arrested and charged with treason. As the principal target for vengeance, Lee Seok-ki would later be arrested after a vote in the National Assembly stripped him of immunity.

Wild claims were made, as the NIS charged that Lee headed a group called the “Revolutionary Organization,” which it said was planning an armed uprising in the event of war with North Korea. The quotations attributed to Lee were provocative, and were said to originate from a recording provided by an informer who attended two meetings of a local branch of the Unified Progressive Party on May 10 and 12.

In a familiar pattern, the NIS illegally leaked selected excerpts to the New Frontier Party and media outlets. The result was as intended, and a furious trial by media ensued, even though the courts had not yet ruled on the admissibility of the transcript as evidence. Lee claimed that he was innocent of all charges, and the NIS had fabricated the quotations it had attributed to him. He charged the NIS with engaging in “political persecution” against his party.

Lee Jung-hee, chairperson of the Unified Progressive Party, announced at a press conference, “The Blue House, facing an unprecedented crisis, and the National Intelligence Service, on the eve of its dissolution after being exposed of rigging the last election, are conducting a Yushin era witch hunt in the 21st century. This is an attempt to silence the candlelight protests as the truth of the fraudulent crimes of the National Intelligence Service are exposed, and voices demanding accountability from President Park Geun-hye intensify.” Lee warned, “Just as they accused all citizens who supported the opposition in the last election as ‘pro-North sympathizers’, they will try to crush and eliminate all democratic forces by labeling them criminal insurgents.”

There were those who questioned the timing of the raid. The NIS claimed that it had been investigating Lee Seok-ki for three years, and the meetings that provided its rationale took place three and a half months beforehand. Why was this moment chosen, they wondered? The NIS was on the ropes. The National Assembly had completed its investigation of the NIS, and the opposition parties were demanding that the NIS should be banned from domestic intelligence gathering. According to a source familiar with the functioning of the NIS, "This investigation looks suspiciously like an attempt by the NIS to justify its existence. It may be intended to block efforts to reduce and eliminate the agency's domestic and investigative branches, which are at its heart."

The Unified Progressive Party conducted its own fact-finding investigation into the May 10 and 12 meetings which had been organized by the party chair of the Gyeong-gi province chapter. Party members attended a lecture by Lee Seok-ki and participated in discussions about the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In a press conference, party chair Lee Jung-hee declared, "There is no evidence whatsoever that the 130 people in attendance are part of a so-called Revolutionary Organization. There is only the NIS' allegation, as it attempts to bury our party through a baseless trial by media." Party members denied that the Revolutionary Organization existed, and accused the NIS of concocting the name as a means of adding a sinister tone to the proceedings.

In talking with those who attended the meetings, party officials investigating the matter found that many of the statements quoted in the media differed substantially from the actual words. It was apparent that the NIS was once again manufacturing "evidence."

At one of the May meetings, there were seven simultaneous small group discussions, and the NIS informer was able to record comments only in the session he attended. Lee Jung-hee pointed out, "An inquiry into the discussions of the six other small groups revealed that they were quite different from the conversation in the group that was recorded. Their conversations were about the immediate difficulties they would face in trying to sustain life in the event of war, ways to survive, and the need to raise public consciousness to oppose war and realize peace; there was no discussion of acquiring weapons or destroying vital facilities."

Some of those in attendance recalled that at the beginning of the Korean War, the South Korean government rounded up leftists and executed them by the thousands. Some estimates place the number of dead as high as 100,000. They expressed concern over a potential repeat if a new war arose, given how the conservatives consistently branded their party as "servants of North Korea" and "terrorists."

In the discussion that was recorded, two hotheads suggested arming themselves and destroying facilities in the event of war. Other group members roundly rejected these comments, saying that such actions were not an option. One group member responded, "Getting firearms is nonsensical and destroying a radar base with high technology and hacking is too." Those who advocated force were ridiculed by the others.

"Please look what the participants did after the meeting," Lee Jung-hee urged. "They did not do anything related to taking over guns or preparing to destroy communications. Even though the NIS put a lot of manpower and money into the raid, it found nothing like a gun or a disturbance device."

The only evidence for the charges made against the Unified Progressive Party is the video,

and we only have the word of the NIS for its content. There is nothing to corroborate the cherry-picked and fabricated quotations that it has leaked. Lee Jung-hee believes the video recording may never be made publicly available. Because no warrant was issued, there is a good chance that the courts may rule the recording inadmissible as evidence.

She called on the NIS to release the original video in its entirety – and without manipulation – so that people could ascertain the truth of the matter and judge for themselves. “While the NIS did not present the original video, a reckless trial in the court of public opinion has happened. The NIS did not precisely follow legal procedures, and they have infringed on judiciary rights by leaking collected evidence illegally, which violates the defendants’ rights that are guaranteed in a normal judiciary process.”

“The most important thing is truth,” Lee continued. “Even if we are in a bad situation, there should be no editing or deleting the facts.”

The ruling New Frontier Party is using the dubious charges against the Unified Progressive Party to achieve its own political aims. It called upon the Democratic Party to end its participation in the mass demonstrations against the National Intelligence Service. For its part, the NIS is expected to argue that the charges against the Unified Progressive Party prove that it ought to retain authority to conduct domestic surveillance and intelligence gathering.

The New Frontier Party has filed a motion in the National Assembly to strip Lee Seok-ki of his seat, despite the fact that his trial has not yet taken place and in South Korea one is legally presumed to be innocent until proven guilty.

In a gross violation of democratic principles, moves are afoot to forcibly disband the Unified Progressive Party. The leadership of the New Frontier Party has asked its members to obtain data in support of that action. In May, conservative groups filed petitions to have the Unified Progressive Party banned. The Ministry of Justice is looking into the possibility of responding to those requests and asking the Constitutional Court to rule in favor of dissolving the Unified Progressive Party.

There is no question that the ruling party finds the views of the Unified Progressive Party distasteful, and it would be delighted to remove the party from the political scene. If the Unified Progressive Party is disbanded, its 100,000 members will be cast adrift from direct participation in the political process.

According to party literature, among the Unified Progressive Party’s goals is to “create a new society in which progressive democracy is established.” The party “has campaigned for free education, free healthcare, and tax on the wealthy as progressive alternatives.” It advocates an end to privatization and a strengthening of public services. The Unified Progressive Party “is the only one that identifies itself as a party for independence, peace and reunification in keeping with the vision” of joint South Korea-North Korea declarations. The strongest advocates of such values will be silenced if the ruling party has its way.

Representative Lee Seok-ki is undergoing daily grilling by the NIS. Like other members of the Unified Progressive Party who are being interrogated, he is refusing to respond to all questions as a protest against political persecution. Reports indicate that the NIS is strongly considering adding an additional charge against Lee, aiding the enemy, which would carry with it a potential death penalty. Lee may be fighting not only for justice, but also his very

life.

If it is not reined in, and soon, the National Intelligence Service could take the nation down the path to repression once again. When South Korea was under military rule, for an individual to advocate progressive policies was an invitation to arrest, torture, and in some cases execution. The years-long struggle for democracy in South Korea brought a hard-won victory. The ruling New Frontier Party cannot be allowed to throw away that victory.

Gregory Elich is on the board of directors of the Jasenovac Research Institute and the advisory board of the Korea Policy Institute. He is the author of Strange Liberators: Militarism, Mayhem, and the Pursuit of Profit.

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