

South Korean union leader Hang Sang-gyun jailed

Thursday 21 July 2016, by [BULLIMORE Kim](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2016).

Han Sang-gyun, president of the 800,000-strong (South) Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), was sentenced to five years' jail on 4 July for his role in organising a series of demonstrations against the Park Geun-hye government.

Han was convicted on charges relating to traffic and public safety violations stemming from 13 anti-government rallies that took place between 2012 and 2015.

The biggest rally, on 14 November 2015, mobilised 130,000 people against Park's increasingly authoritarian regime and its attacks on workers' rights, pay and conditions. According to Yi San, writing for US publication Labor Notes, the court accepted the government's claim that Han had incited violence at the rally when he yelled, "Let's show we can bring Seoul to a stop. Let's advance towards the Presidential Palace".

Violence did take place, but it was instigated by the state. The government mobilised 20,000 police, who used more than 700 buses to cordon off the protest, restricting the right to march. Tear gas and water cannons were used, injuring dozens of protesters. Among those injured was 69-year-old farmer activist Baek Nam-ki, who was hit with the full force of a water cannon. After Baek collapsed, police continued to use the high pressure water to prevent others providing him first aid.

In the wake of the demonstration, police issued an arrest warrant for Han, who sought sanctuary for 24 days in a Buddhist temple in central Seoul. When police threatened to storm the temple, Han voluntarily gave himself up on 10 December.

Police sought to prosecute Han for sedition, a charge that hasn't been used for 30 years. Sedition charges were regularly used against democracy, civil rights and labour activists during the military dictatorship of Park Geun-hye's father, Park Chung-hee, between 1961 and 1979, and during the subsequent 1980-87 military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan, who seized control after Park's assassination.

Police also issued summonses for more than 1,500 unionists, activists and citizens who had participated in the protest. Criminal procedures were launched against 585 KCTU leaders and members. Seven are currently facing indictment, while another 20 remain in police custody.

The KCTU rejected the court's decision against Han, saying that it was "a ruling that will go down in history for trampling democracy, human rights and labour". The 5 July edition of Seoul-based newspaper Hankoyleh noted that it was "the stiffest sentence for a rally organiser since South Korea's democratization in 1987".

Park's crackdown on the labour movement has been condemned internationally. The general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, Sharan Burrows, said that the South Korean government was criminalising legitimate protest. In a 4 July ITUC statement, Burrows noted that Park had lost her parliamentary majority in April and that the sentencing of Han showed "that

the courts are subjugated to the political agenda of a government that has no majority”.

Amnesty International in South Korea also condemned the court’s decision, calling Han’s conviction “unjust and shameful”. In a 6 July statement, Amnesty’s Arnold Fang stated that Han was “the latest victim of South Korea’s increasingly ruthless crackdown on peaceful dissent”, and that the sentence would have “a chilling effect on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly by deterring other would-be organisers”.

In June, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights, Maina Kiai, also released a report criticising Han’s arrest and South Korea’s crackdown on trade unions and peaceful assembly. Kiai had criticised Park’s regime during a visit in January 2016, saying undue restrictions were “seeping into every state of the peaceful assembly process” and that the government was using “national security” and public “convenience” as a cover to restrict the right to protest.

KIM BULLIMORE

P.S.

* Red Flag. 18 JULY 2016:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/5399>