

The 3rd Round of Korea-US FTA Talks coming...

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Korean Alliance against the KorUS FTA

The third round of talks over the Korea-U.S. FTA will be held in Seattle in the United States -a famous battleground of the WTO protests in 1999-from 6th to 9th September. The third round of FTA talks is very crucial because the South Korean government and US had almost completed the negotiations of the general framework of the agreement in the last negotiation in Seoul in July and will sort out the details of it in the upcoming negotiation. Drug pricing system and import of US beef, which is NOT proved to be free from mad cow disease, are being expected as halting points of the next talks. Both of them were preliminaries of opening the Korea-US FTA. But Korean people have suspicion that both governments have done on the draft of the FTA.

There is much possibility to reach an agreement in the meeting with the US side over the drug pricing system just before third Korea-US FTA negotiation. Meeting over drug-pricing system will be held in Singapore, 21st-22nd August.

As for the beef issues, 31 US senators sent a letter to President Rho Moo-hyun in early August, which urged Korean government to open the beef Market as soon as possible. They threatened that the US would not continue the FTA talks if the ban was not lifted. The government is planning to import US beef when some Korean experts finish inspection of US beef processing facilities despite rising people's anger against the US beef imports. If these process are done, the proposed FTA and especially the 3rd round talks will get the momentum to finalize.

The Korean Alliance against Korea-U.S. FTA(KoA) is planning to send a delegation of around 100 people to represent the various social, student, worker, intellectual and farmer movements against Korea-U.S. FTA and will work in solidarity with American social and labor movement.

President Roh being increasingly criticized for KorUS FTA

"Regardless of fierce nation-wide protests, I will dedicate my remaining time in office to realizing the FTA." These words encapsulate the attitude that has seen South Korean President Roh Mu-Hyun and his government become increasingly defensive and isolated in power. An editorial in the July 8th Hangyoreh newspaper argued: "The government cannot persuade the people with abstract rhetoric that the nation's social systems and international competitiveness will be enhanced, nor can it persuade them by gathering data favorable to its stance. The government did not publicly disclose the results of the first and second round of negotiations. Under such circumstances, it would be public deception for the government to say that it would"collect opinions from every walk of life"and reflect those opinions at the negotiation table."

The President who was once seen as a progressive independent leader by many had been able to

forge a legitimacy amongst wide sectors of population, social movements, civil society, intellectuals and the media. However, these forces are becoming increasingly distant towards the regime and its various policies as the consensus that it attempted to build between various social forces is being ripped apart from the deepening social polarisation of South Korean neo-liberalism. Recently on July 12th, 50 000 demonstrators gathered in front of Seoul City Hall Plaza in an anti-FTA rally organised by the Korean Alliance against the KorUS FTA. The “participatory” regime of Roh Mu-Hyun which had earlier promised to only precede with the FTA after consulting with all sectors of society answered the dissent by sending in riot police to beat protestors and block them from staging a press release voicing their opinions.

However, the decreasing popularity of the proposed FTA with the US government has even seen many former advisors and high profile intellectuals who had given public support to or even serve in various government positions, desert the President.

Kim Yon-oak, a well known social commentator and oriental philosopher in South Korea, who led the public opposition campaign to the Grand National Party’s attempted indictment of the President attacked the President’s persistence with the FTA negotiations arguing he didn’t “understand why South Korea has to seek the FTA while there is nothing it can from it.” Even openly pro-government intellectuals such as Jung Tae-in and Lee Joung-woo, a former presidential secretary for economic affairs and special advisor to President Roh respectively have become harsh critics of the President and have publicly thrown their support behind the anti-FTA campaign. The government has also been coming into a confrontation with layers of the media over their critical reporting of the FTA. When Roh first came to office he publicly thanked the role of the media in his rise to power wondering “Could I have become the President without the help of the press” while attending a Korean Broadcasting Service reception.

However more recently his opinions have changed, claiming that “These days, egoism in broadcasting companies, employees and labour unions is at the core and there is no suitable way to remedy it.” President Roh and a number of his advisors were also very critical of documentaries that MBC and KBS television stations had broadcasted on the FTA issue. He also threatened to legally sanction other media sources over their reporting of the issue especially when they reported Roh’s remarks that the FTA was needed to maintain the strong political and military alliance between the US and South Korea. However as the growing polarisation continues to deepen in South Korean society so will the legitimacy of this once very popular President continue to crumble as did his predecessors who also implemented the neo-liberalism in South Korea.

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