

South-Korea: social mobilizations on the eve of the presidential elections

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Interview with Mikyung Ryu from People's Solidarity for Social Progress by Cédric Durand.

In spite of governmental prohibition, Korean social movements have organized a big rally on sunday 11th of November. Which were the forces who contributed to this mobilization and what was the aim of this demonstration?

Hundreds of social movement organizations including 'Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)', 'Korean Peasants League (KPL)', along with 'Democratic Labor Party (KDLP)' formed an Organizing Committee of National Day of Action for Sunday's rally. Every year, KCTU has a big rally in nation wide to commemorate Chun Tae-il, a labor martyr who burned himself to death in protest, demanding the enforcement of labor laws on Nov. 11, 1970. But in this year, besides the labor movement, various social movements got together on this day, to express people's demands, with the presidential election around a month ahead. Only in this year, there have been various people's struggles against the neo-liberal globalization. Lots of women precarious workers who were working for Homever/E-land, a Korean retail chain which acquired Carrefour, have been striking for over 140 days for their reinstatement. In June, the company resorted to mass dismissals of non-regular workers rather than giving them permanent employment contracts, required by a new law.

Workers in construction industry, who suffer from poor working condition and low wage caused by the multilevel sub-contract system, keep their struggle for collective bargaining and 44-hour workweek. An intensive crack-down against street vendors in cities are another factor which threatens the people's livelihood. Just 2 weeks before the rally, one of the construction workers joining the struggle and one of the street vendors fighting against the crack-down died. They couldn't find any way but to take their own life in that painful struggle. A ratification motion of Korea-US FTA and a bill of extension of Korean troops in have been submitted to the National Assembly, in spite of wide opposition. In this situation, the social movements intended to open a space where people from around the country could express their demand in their own voices. Various people gathered under the three main slogan; "Abolish precarious employment!" "Reject the Korea- US FTA ratification!" "Stop the War, We need peace!"

The press talk about 25 000 demonstrators, it's a huge record for an illegal demo, no? But there was also a strong repression. What is your assessment of this mobilization?

Actually 30,000 people got together in downtown of and many other people were struggling against the police, here and there of the county's main highway tollgate, to enter the city. When the organizing committee notified the police of this rally in advance, they regard this rally as an illegal one on the pretext of the fear of traffic jams and violence. 4 ministers of the government held a joint

press conference and announced that they would do their best to nip an illegal demonstration in a bud. After that, the police in rural areas visited every single family to threaten with intensive punishment. They, even, forced the rental coach companies which made contracts with peasants union to cancel it threatening with disadvantage. In, the police blocked every way to the City Hall, the venue of the rally we notified, with hundreds of police buses. Totally more than 64,000 of riot police were mobilized to repress the rally.

In this situation, to secure the gathering space, the participants secretly appeared from some metro stations and suddenly took the street and marched forwarding to the City Hall. Those who couldn't enter were fighting against the police's disturbance and some of them succeeded. After the first rally, the participants were divided into 2 groups and quickly moved to another place to try to break through the blockage. The police attacked the demonstrators with water canons. Repetitive warnings that the demonstrator would be arrested for participating in an illegal demonstration were made by police. Some participants tied window frames with ropes and pulled them together here, and others pushed the buses there, to get rid of the blockages and go closer to the place where we intended to have the rally. Two helicopters approached the demonstrators and took pictures of them and made noises several times. Finally we could secure a place between the City Hall and the embassy and got started the main event no earlier than 8 o'clock in the evening. Most of the peasants in local places couldn't come to , so the number of actual participants in the rally held in is much smaller than our plan. Nevertheless, we realized the rally in spite of various obstacles. There are also some limitations of this rally. We did not succeed in giving wider publicity to the object of this rally. The citizens could see only some superficial or sometimes distorted fact. The media didn't report anything but "the clash between violent demonstrators and the police" or "the serious traffic jam in the center of the city." We must have let the citizens know why the workers of Homever/E-land are not able to go back to their job, what makes an electrician and a street vender took their own lives...

From your point of view, why the government has taken this decision to prohibit the demo ? does it participates in a wider restriction of democratic rights?

In the last Sunday's rally around 120 persons were arrested and many got wounded. Not only this one but also other various rallies have been banned by the Noh Moo-Hyeon government. From the dispatch the Korean troops in Iraq to the Korea- US FTA, from expansion the US military base in Pyeongtaek to the amendment of the labor law, every agendas whose aim were making Korean society fit to the neoliberal, armed & financial globalization promoted by the government faced huge and wide opposition. Instead of withdrawing the policies, the government deprived the people of the opportunity to express their opinions against it. When the peasants in Pyeongtaek resisted the expansion of military base, the government mobilized the army to expel its citizen from their own village. Whenever labor unions tried to strike against these neoliberal agendas, the government would blame their action as a "political strike" which is not permitted to the trade union and prohibited by force mobilizing the public power. But when they tried to strike to guarantee their labor right and even their job, the government would denounce it as a "collective self-interest" or "request for the impossible" and let the employers charge several millions USD of the compensation for the estimated damage caused by the strike.

Last year every single demonstration or even small sized campaign against "Korea-US FTA" were totally banned and lots of activist are still in jail. From the second year of his term of office on, the rate of support for the president Noh Moo-hyeon dropped suddenly because of the social crisis caused by the chronic economic depression and strengthened by neoliberal globalization. In this context, the ruling party (Uri-Party) suffered a crushing defeat in the provincial election of 2005. In this situation, the government which wants to promote the neoliberal financial globalization and strengthen the military alliance with the U.S but has no support, keep destroying democratic rights

to suppress the social movements against its agendas, even more severely than during the military dictatorship. We can see clearly that the neoliberal globalization and the democracy never can go together.

The 19th of December will take place the presidential election. What is the general political situation? What is the picture on the left ?

The presidential election of this December has a special meaning. Two decades have passed since 1987's June people's uprising for ending up the military dictatorship and democracy and a decade since the 1997 economic crisis. In 1987, after the people's uprising, the conservative force based on the former military dictatorship took power, choking the people's desire for democracy with a constitutional amendment of newly introducing a direct presidential election. Following the military government, the Kim Young-sam government, which took power by the merger of the conservative party based on military force and a civilian political force, began globalization of Korean economy to find a way out for chaebol joining the OECD and the WTO. But this resulted in the financial crisis of 1996-97 and the liberal force took advantage of this crisis for taking power in 1997. The Kim Dae-jung government preached neoliberalism and financial globalization to as the only way to overcome the crisis and the following government of president Noh Moo-hyeon intended to complete the neoliberal reform of .

After 10 years' neoliberal reform, people's life got worse owing to flexibilization of labor, destruction of agriculture, public services, the gap between the rich and the poor got increased severely. People's dissatisfaction and anger against the ruling liberal force got bigger and bigger. Therefore, for the conservative force (The Grand Nation Party), this year's election is a good chance to get back the governmental power, taking advantage of the downfall of the liberal force. Indeed the rate of support for the candidate of the GNP, Lee Myeong-bak is more than 40% (after Lee Hoe-chang, the former candidate of the GNP in 1997 and 2002 declared to run this election, it fell from over 50%) in some polls , arguing that the social crisis of Korea caused by the disability of the ruling party. On the other hand, the rate for the candidate from liberal force, Jeong Dong -yeong is not more than 15%.

The GNP is emblemizing themselves as the only responsible political group who can lead the real economic develop. The majority of the citizens express their disappointment for the neoliberal reform and desire for the economic and social stability by supporting the GNP, even though it suggests pro-transnational capital, anti-working class and anti-environment policies. The liberal force is trying to catch up with them with the image of a legitimate successor to the 1987 democratization and a leading group of peace in Korean Peninsular through widening the economic cooperation between two Koreas (which means neoliberalization of North Korea in real), but it doesn't work. Regarding the progressive party, the KDLP is getting only 2 3% of support in maximum. In other words, even though the people withdraw their support to the Noh Moo-hyeon government, it didn't change into the support the social movements, or the leftist party.

There is a strong record of social mobilization in but at the same time it seems that the left has not such a big influence in the political sphere. What may explain this?

The overenthusiasm for the candidate Lee Myeong-bak shows that people don't regard the left as an alternative. Let me explain this in two ways. One reason is from the KDLP itself. This party was formed by collective support of the labor movement, especially KCTU, and other social movements to open the political space for working class. By the way, in the general election of 2002, it won 10 seats in the National Assembly when the party-list voting system was introduced for the first time. After that it couldn't help fitting itself into the neoliberal political system which encourages policy-oriented party inside the National Assembly. Doing that, it would rather focus on the activity inside the National Assembly and compete with other parties than participate social movements and let

people be the political subject. In this election, what is to be done by the KDLP is to reveal the real cause of the crisis in the people's life – no other than neoliberal financial globalization- and support people's struggle against it.

But right after confirmed as the candidate, Kwon Yeong-gil, the candidate of the KDLP visited the National Memorial Board, the symbolic place of anti-communism, intending to showing off "the social tolerance", and then "Korea confederation of small and medium business" and appeal that the KDLP is not an anti-business party. With this walk, the KDLP failed to broaden the political sphere, and instead of that, accepted the bourgeois political rule. Another reason comes from the social movements on which the KDLP is based. While the neoliberal globalization was happening in , there brought various spontaneous people's struggle against it. But it is still at the level of depending particular interest of each group and failed to build a universal alternatives. Referring to the alter-globalization movement around the world, the social movements in should rebuild the idea of social transformation associated with new ideas such as internationalism and feminism instead of national interest or corporatism, against the neoliberal globalization.

At this moment, EU and are negotiating a free trade agreement. It seems that there exists a significant social opposition to this treaty in . May you explain the main issues of this treaty and the way korean and european movements are resisting it.

The Korean government has already concluded the negotiation for the Korea-US FTA and submitted the ratification motion to the National Assembly. With the Korea-US FTA, the ruling class in intended to introduce so-called "Global standard" in the whole Korean society. It means they would make Korean society more favorable for the transnational financial capital and destroy the people's basic rights such as labor right, food sovereignty, access to basic services etc. That's why the majority of the Korean citizens have been resisting this agreement. The aim of the Korea-EU FTA is exactly the same. In the middle of a long suspension of the negotiation for so-called the DDA in the WTO the bilateral or regional Free Trade Agreements is playing its role. Last September some activists of went to Brussels as a struggle mission against the 3rd round of the negotiation for Korea-EU FTA and did various activities with some social movement in . Not to make this activity one-time event, the social movements keep propagating the anti-people orientation and characteristic of this treaty in each society