

Beef Protests Put South Korea Cabinet Into Turmoil

Administration Faces Shake-Up, Threat to Agenda

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SEOUL, South Korea -- Public outrage that began six weeks ago over worries about U.S. beef imports has now brought South Korea's government to its knees.

Tuesday, tens of thousands of protesters marched through downtown Seoul, and President Lee Myung-bak's entire cabinet offered to resign. Mr. Lee is expected to take several days to decide whom to replace.

Associated Press

Thousands of South Koreans rallied against a beef deal Tuesday.

The likelihood of a new cabinet shake-up adds to the sense that Mr. Lee's administration, still less than four months old, has bogged down and will have trouble carrying out promised deregulation and other changes that international investors were eager to see.

Protests by activist groups helped bring democracy to South Korea in the late 1980s after decades of authoritarian rule. Since then, left-wing groups have played a constant role in Korean politics, with their well-honed tool of mass demonstrations. Even during the presidencies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun -- left-of-center leaders who governed between 1998 and this year -- leftists often took to the streets to fight economic changes and free-trade pacts.

Now the return of conservative government in the person of Mr. Lee, a former businessman, has galvanized the activists. The protests began May 2, two weeks after Mr. Lee announced that South Korea would restart full imports of U.S. beef. Most imports had been suspended over concerns about mad-cow disease.

Initially, the public was concerned about the safety of U.S. beef, amid sensational media allegations. Some made the false claim that Americans didn't eat the kind of beef being exported to South Korea. Soon opposition-party politicians and activist groups seized on the issue to

fan dissent over many of Mr. Lee's policies.

Since taking office in late February, he pushed plans to downsize government offices, privatize several state-run companies and force schools to spend more time teaching English. In doing so, he alienated three powerful constituencies: bureaucrats, trade unions and teachers.

"All the complaints just exploded at once," said Choi Jin, director of the Institute of Presidential Leadership, a research center in Seoul. "If you try to understand [the outrage] with only the beef issue, you cannot understand it."

Tuesday, anti-Lee protesters aimed to marshal one million people to the streets in dozens of cities. They hoped to tie their effort symbolically to the prodemocracy movement that began exactly 21 years ago on June 10, 1987, and led to the creation of South Korea's constitution.

The size of the protests appeared to fall far short of the one-million goal, but tens of thousands of people did transform downtown Seoul into a raucous protest zone Tuesday night. A group of vegetarians parked two trucks with signs that said, "Don't eat Korean meat or American meat." A group from one trade union marched behind a banner that said, "High oil prices and inflation, Lee Myung-bak should take responsibility for them."

In a new development, a few thousand Lee supporters appeared at a downtown plaza that, night after night, has been occupied by anti-Lee protesters. The two sides blasted competing songs over giant sound systems. The emergence of a pro-Lee group could mark a turning point if it begins to balance out a debate dominated so far by opponents of the president.

The demonstrations have turned violent several times in the past two weeks as protesters repeatedly tried to march to the presidential residence, called Blue House, and were turned back by police.

After electing Mr. Lee in a landslide, South Koreans have soured on his administration even though it has only talked about major changes. In part, the backlash has been driven by politicians and groups tied to the centrist-nationalist United Democratic Party, which Mr. Lee and the conservative Grand National Party displaced.

While South Korea has been democratically ruled for two decades, street demonstrations still play a powerful role in shaping policy.

Associated Press

Weeks of protests, including this one Tuesday by Buddhist monks, have brought South Korea's cabinet to its knees.

"I'm not saying that the election is not important, but the true democracy is on the streets," said Lee Seul-kee, 24 years old, who has been attending the protests since they began and works for an activist group called Youth All Together, which supports left-wing causes and politicians. "The government should listen to the demands from the streets rather than the election result."

Protesters are calling for Mr. Lee's impeachment and carry signs that say, "Lee Myung-bak Out." They call the president and his ministers "out of touch" and "authoritarian" despite steps he has taken with the U.S. to refine the beef deal.

In a group of pro-Lee demonstrators, Chung Cha-kwon, a clinical-nutrition professor from Hallym University, said South Koreans are still trying to sort out their roles in a democracy. "These leftist protesters are very noisy," he said. "You don't know the opinion of the silent majority."

In recent days, Mr. Lee's immediate predecessors, Messrs. Kim and Roh, called on opposition politicians -- who have boycotted the National Assembly as part of their protest -- to return to work. Mr. Roh said that calling for Mr. Lee's ouster is neither constitutional nor democratic.

The protests aren't expected to force Mr. Lee's resignation. Nor have they had a significant short-term impact on South Korea's economy, home to global companies such as Samsung Electronics Co. However, economists say the protests could damp consumer and business sentiment, contributing to a sense of malaise that was a key reason voters chose Mr. Lee last year.

It isn't clear how many of the cabinet resignations Mr. Lee will accept. A broad shake-up would please his political opponents, but it would bog down the government for weeks as new cabinet officials undergo legislative review.

Many of Mr. Lee's supporters are older -- the oldest survived the Korean War of the 1950s -- and remember the country's poverty and struggle against communist North Korea. Mr. Lee's opponents tend to be the young, who grew up in relative prosperity and think of North Korea as a poor

country that poses little threat.

"As the years go on, these younger people will win out," says S.W. Chung, a Korean War veteran who attended the demonstration in support of Mr. Lee in downtown Seoul. "America has to compromise on this beef issue or it will lose support from the young people. The old men will disappear, and America will lose South Korea to North Korea and China."

--SungHa Park contributed to this article.