

SKorea's Lee calls for law and order after weeks of protests

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SEOUL — South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak, whose new conservative government has been rocked by weeks of street protests, vowed Friday to listen more humbly to the people but also stressed the rule of law.

In a clear reference to the mass rallies against US beef imports, Lee also called for safeguards against the spread of false information, "prompting social unrest that spread like epidemics."

He also urged a return to rationality rather than excessively emotional behaviour. The president was speaking at the formal opening of parliament, which was delayed more than six weeks by an opposition boycott in support of the beef protesters.

South Korea suspended US beef imports in 2003 after a US mad cow case. In April it reached a deal with Washington to resume them in hopes of paving the way for a wider free trade agreement (FTA).

Critics said the government rushed into the deal to please Washington and ignored the supposed dangers of mad cow disease, which Seoul and Washington say are non-existent. Weeks of sometimes violent mass protests ensued, fuelled by online rumours, making much of Seoul's city centre a night-time no-go zone.

Seoul had to send negotiators to Washington to obtain extra health safeguards and the meat is now on sale.

Lee told MPs that representative democracy had been challenged by "the active participation in politics by the public and the development of the Internet." The government and legislature must proactively respond, he said.

Lee, who took office less than five months ago, said the beef controversy had taught him that "it is paramount to carefully listen to what the public wants.

"I also reaffirmed my commitment to uphold, at the same time, the principle of the rule of law and maintain social order," said the president.

The former business executive once nicknamed the "Bulldozer" for his forcefulness, pledged to focus on winning the public's trust.

"I will take a more humble attitude and try to win over the hearts and minds of the people one step at a time."

Lee urged parliament to ratify the FTA as soon as possible.

He promised to set up a national health organisation to ensure food safety, but lamented the lack of mutual trust in Korean society.

"Where there is a dearth of law and order, trust would be hard to come by. The government will establish a firm principle that more and more freedom and rights will be accorded only to those who respect the law."

Lee pledged to work to make Korea an advanced society dominated by rationality and civic virtues.

"A society rampant with excessive emotional behaviour, disorderliness and rudeness cannot be called an advanced society by any measure.

"In this connection, we have to guard against 'infodemics,' a phenomenon in which inaccurate, false information is disseminated, prompting social unrest that spread like epidemics."