

South Koreans Fear That Protests Have Sidetracked Government

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SEOUL -- An estimated 50,000 people marched in Seoul Saturday, continuing a two-month-long antigovernment campaign that has battered South Korea's new president. But it's unclear how much longer the movement will sustain momentum, as sentiment rises that the protests may be distracting the government from addressing major economic problems.

Saturday's march was the second largest in a series of near-daily protests that began May 2. They were triggered by the government's decision in mid-April to resume full imports of U.S. beef -- which some local media portrayed as unsafe -- but they soon expanded into broader criticism of President Lee Myung-bak.

The largest rally, on June 10, drew about 80,000 people in downtown Seoul, according to police estimates. Thousands of others protested in other cities around the country.

But over the past two weeks, opinion polls have showed more South Koreans are becoming concerned that the protests are distracting Mr. Lee and the government from tackling a spate of economic challenges.

Rising oil and commodity prices have pushed up South Korea's consumer price index by 5.5% in June from the year-ago period, the highest level in nearly 10 years. The government recently cut its economic growth expectation for 2008 to 4.7% from 6%. The benchmark Korea Composite Stock Price Index has fallen 15% since the candlelight vigils began -- and is 24% below the peak it reached Oct. 31.

The government said Sunday it would take further measures to deal with rising oil prices on the economy. Among the steps is a plan to reduce public-sector energy consumption by 10% by cutting streetlight usage and air conditioning in government buildings.

"The government should now try to stabilize consumer prices," says Hahm Sung-deuk, a professor of political economy at Korea University.

Standing in the way of government action is a deadlock in South Korea's legislature. Politicians from opposition parties -- many of whom have supported the protests -- have boycotted the new session of the National Assembly. As a result, Mr. Lee's ruling Grand National Party, wary of appearing to be unilaterally passing legislation, hasn't opened the session.

Some coming events may still fuel the protests. President George W. Bush is scheduled to visit Seoul on Aug. 5. A fresh batch of American beef is expected to arrive late next month. Protest groups have vowed to hold rallies for both events and launch new campaigns to boycott U.S. beef.

Following the initial protests, Seoul and Washington last month amended the deal to limit imports to beef from cattle younger than 30 months old, which are believed to pose less risk of mad-cow disease.

South Korea, which has banned most U.S. beef since 2003, after an outbreak of mad-cow disease in the U.S., officially resumed imports of U.S. beef June 26.

Even so, protesters remain critical of the beef deal, though they tend to speak out more broadly on other economic themes, such as Mr. Lee's plans to privatize some government-run companies.

The mass street protests have drawn attention from the person who is the most respected voice on South Korea's political scene -- United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who returned to the country Thursday for his first lengthy visit in a year and a half.

"It is important for the government to be responsible for protecting public welfare and health," Mr. Ban said at a news conference Friday. "At the same time, it is also very important for the people to trust the government, to support the government policies and to support the government's desire to keep international standards and agreements."

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