The Fuss Surrounding Cho Kuk

On June 30, 2021, former Minister of Justice Cho Kuk filed a lawsuit against the influential conservative newspaper The Chosun Ilbo for 1 billion won ($890,000) in damages. The thing is that in an article about one trio convicted of molesting a prostitute, an illustration was attached depicting Cho Kuk and his daughter Cho Min. Although the newspaper apologized for the inappropriate use of the illustration, Cho Kuk stated that the incident was a serious violation of his personal rights, and one that could not be justified by free speech or technical errors. In his opinion, the one-billion won lawsuit (half directed toward the reporter, the other half toward the editor) should "eradicate the unacceptable practice of harassment in the form of articles in media outlets".

It is worth reminding the general public who Cho Kuk is. He is one of the closest friends and associates of President Moon Jae-in, and was Moon’s long-time secretary for personnel affairs. Even by that time, he and his family were at the center of several corruption scandals, and society was affected most of all by the story of how his daughter was admitted to medical school. Although she did a two-week internship during which she washed test tubes and was involved in translating texts from English, she suddenly wound up as the lead author of an article on a complex, narrowly focused, professional topic that she co-authored with several well-respected professors. This allowed her to
enter the university as a young, talented professional, after which she gloriously flunked the first exam session in the specialty about which the article was written.

Despite all this, Moon decided to appoint Cho as Minister of Justice. This responsible post in South Korea controls all the security forces, especially the police and the prosecutor's office. Despite the opposition from conservatives in parliament, Cho Kuk was appointed to the post by the will of the president, but only held this post for 35 days, since the scale of the rallies protesting this began to resemble the “folk festivities” of the “candle revolution”.

Cho resigned, but the story ended up having consequences. It is no coincidence that after the April 7, 2021 by-elections, which failed for the Democrats, a group of young MPs with the National Assembly that tried to assess the reasons for the failure pointed to insufficient reaction on the part of the party to the Cho Kuk case, and the fact that they could not decisively dissociate themselves from this story. Yet they were promptly “shushed”.

Meanwhile, Cho Kuk and his family are periodically the subject of news stories. In January 2021, 29-year-old Cho Min, the daughter of Cho Kuk, received her medical license after passing a written exam, and was able to pursue a career as a doctor, sparking the “anger of approximately 130,000 doctors and medical students”. The author of the quotation - the director of the Korean Pediatric Society Lim Hyun-taek - stated that the license was not issued properly because usually, when admission to a university is invalidated due to academic fraud, a person is expelled from the university.

On January 31, 2021, Minister of Education Yoo Eun-hye finally “woke up”, and announced that the ministry will deal with the alleged fraud related to the admission of Cho Kuk’s daughter. However, in February the Ha-Neul General Hospital, operated by the Korea Electric Power Corp. (KEPCO), took on Cho Min as an intern while drawing away from practice of posting the names of new doctors on its website.

And this was despite the fact that on December 23, 2020, Cho Kuk’s wife, Chung Kyung-sim, was convicted of forging documents, including certificates of internship and volunteer work so she would be accepted into medical school. Even Seoul Central District Court, led by Moon’s supporters, found her guilty on all seven charges of academic fraud, and sentenced her to four years in prison with a 500 million won ($451,000) fine.

In the summer of 2021, Cho Kuk once again reminded everyone about himself by publishing a memoir with the slanted title “Cho Kuk’s Time: Pain, Truth, and Unspoken Thoughts” and predictable content: he is not the guilty one, and these are all plots spun by envious people. He said that the 11 charges, including bribery and document forgery, were fabricated by some media outlets.

On June 2, Song Young-gil, the chairman of the ruling party, publicly apologized for the scandal involving the Cho Kuk family, and pointed out that the story contributed a lot to the voters’ loss of confidence that led to the ruling party’s defeat in April.

At the height of the scandal that occurred at the end of 2019, then chairman of the ruling party Lee Hae-chan apologized for the actions taken by the Cho Kuk family, but the author still considers Song’s statement to be very important: the ruling party is still trying to distance itself from this scandal, although the motive behind this public statement is largely related to the fact that Song Young-gil, unlike Cho Kuk, is not a member of Moon Jae In’s inner circle, and is trying to demonstrate a certain independence.

Still, the conservative media criticized Song's statement anyway, as usual, discerning hypocrisy and lack of sincerity in that.

But so far the process of investigating the former minister of justice is proceeding extremely slowly, and when he is questioned it is about matters of secondary importance. Meanwhile, on June 30, 2021, the High Court upheld a verdict in which Cho Kuk’s nephew, Cho Beom-dong, was sentenced to four years in prison and fined 50 million won ($41,570) on multiple charges including embezzlement, breach of trust, and violating the laws governing capital markets.

Cho Beom-dong was the owner of the private equity fund called Co-Link in which the Cho Kuk family had invested. He was found guilty of rigging stock prices and embezzling approximately 7.2 billion won from companies in which Co-Link had invested, as well as concealing and destroying company documents that could have worked against the Cho family.

The fund invested most of the Cho family’s money in Wealth C&T, a local manufacturer of light pole switches, two months after Cho Kuk became the Senior Secretary to the President for Civil Affairs in 2017.
As for the lawsuit against the newspaper, in this story both sides have it good. On the one hand, it was hardly accidental that The Chosun Ilbo put a photo of Cho Kuk and his daughter as an illustration for its scandalous publication, but on the other hand, Cho Kuk himself is vigorously trying to support himself with the proper level of hype, and trying to prove his innocence.

In this case, the author agrees with Cho Kuk, since these kinds of methods are really unacceptable. On the other hand, it is worth recalling that while Moon Jae-in was in the opposition, his methods of dealing with political opponents did not differ that much from those used by The Chosun Ilbo. And then again, it is worth remembering that the newspaper is very fond of applying these practices. The point is not only that among well-respected South Korean newspapers it holds first place in the number of false reports dedicated to North Korea, but also that after the tragedy with the Seoul ferry, it was The Chosun Ilbo that threw out the fake news that while the children were drowning Park spent seven hours with her lover.

Let’s recap. As The Korea Times points out, Cho Kuk has become a symbol of social confusion, national division, deepening confrontation, and “the ruling party still has a long way to go before making a sincere apology for the problem of Cho Kuk”.

And instead of a conclusion. Some commentators raise objections about the author: why does he write so much about Korean corruption when the situation in Russia is no better? The answer is simple: it’s one thing when we are faced with a typical example of a corrupt official, one who is expected to lie and steal. It is quite another when someone who has positioned himself as a steadfast opponent to these practices is caught in lies and outright theft. Comparing what Moon and his team criticized in relation to the activities done by Park Geun-hye, and what they began to create themselves when they seized power, inevitably you begin to remember the tale of how he who conquered the dragon turns into a dragon himself.

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