A Year of CIO Activity

On the pages of our online magazine, we have repeatedly written about The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), formed in South Korea under Moon Jae-in as an alternative to the Prosecutor's Office. It was established as an independent agency directly subordinate to the president and responsible for investigating crimes from VIPs to the country's leader.

There are 25 prosecutors, 40 investigators and 20 administrative staff, with a budget of over 10 billion won ($ 8.5 million) per year. Much was expected, but a year later, the CIO received deserved criticism for "lack of concrete achievements and deepening controversy over political bias".

Since its inception in January, the office has investigated 12 cases. Only one of them has been completed, concerning allegations that in 2018, Seoul's superintendent for education, Cho Hee-yeon, abused his authority to re-employ teachers who were fired for involvement in corruption cases. He was charged only on December 24, and this was not done by the department itself, but by the Prosecutor's Office, as it turned out that the office can only prosecute judges, prosecutors and high-ranking police officers.

Of the remaining eleven, four (one third !!) are assigned to Yoon Suk-yeol, the opposition presidential candidate. In late October, the latest investigation began with allegations that he ordered prosecutors to document judges' tendencies when he was prosecutor general. The CIO is scrutinizing Yoon, hoping that some of the suspicions raised against him will be confirmed, but there is nothing to show for now. On their behalf, a request to arrest prosecutors
suspected of having asked the opposition Power of the People Party to file criminal complaints against members of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea was dismissed by the court for lack of evidence.

At the same time, South Korean Seongnamagate, in which the ex-governor of Gyeonggi Province may be involved, and the ruling party’s presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung, the agency returned to the prosecutor's office. The suspected abuser of the head of the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office, Lee Sung-yeon, the primary conductor of Moon's line in this structure, was taken for interrogation in an official car in an environment that suggested "special treatment ''. 

The methods of the new body are also questionable, especially in the context of respect for press freedom. The department is suspected of seizing the results of a forensic examination of the official smartphone of the Supreme Prosecutor's Office's press secretary to examine her contacts with journalists on sensitive cases.

In December, this was supplemented by accusations that the office reviewed the recordings of telephone conversations of journalists and ordinary citizens who criticized the government and this structure. According to local telecommunications companies, the CIO received recordings of telephone conversations of at least 40 journalists from 13 media outlets, including representatives of conservative newspapers: six from the Chosun Ilbo and three from the Chuang Ilbo, as well as three journalists from the Munhwa Ilbo, who criticized the agency's investigations into Yoon Suk-yeol allegations.

However, and this is interesting to the first one. The person who raised the issue was not a conservative. Kim Kyung-yul, the former Deputy Secretary-General of the NGO Lawyers for a Democratic Society, criticized Moon Jae-in's administration.

The agency claims that due process was followed up, and it only verified the information of those who spoke on the phone with some of the people under investigation. "After confirming that reporters were in contact with suspects for business purposes, we excluded them from the subject of investigation."

However, when checking telephone records, the CIO obtains personal information, including the subscriber's name, the resident's registration number and address, and not just the phone numbers of incoming and outgoing calls. In turn, if the person whose telephone records have been verified contacts the telecommunications company, it must provide him with detailed information about when and which investigating authorities requested the data.

However, Journalists are not high-level officials subject to CIO investigations. The Directorate declined to disclose what it wanted to verify from the telephone records.

In his inaugural speech on January 21, 2021, CIO chief Kim Jin-wook pledged to maintain political neutrality by fairly investigating corruption among senior government officials. Still, conservative media write that the Office undermined its value with incompetent and politically biased investigations. Now it is under suspicion of spying on journalists. Its meaning of existence is "fading away". This is not so much about bias but about inefficiency. And the next president may disband the office as part of the factional struggle, as Moon did with Pak's attempt to create an analogue of the Emergencies Ministry after the sinking of MV Sewol.

And if this happens, the hopes of the incumbent president that after leaving office, he will be tried by a special body filled with his supporters in advance are scattered like a morning haze.

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