Moon Jae-in’s Great Purge. Episode 5: the Fight against Corruption and the Control of the Media

In the previous article on the current situation in the domestic politics of the RK, we wrote that the new president of the country, Mr. Moon Jae-in, had begun an extensive purge, which is being carried out in several ways.

First, another "crusade against corruption" has been launched that involves the establishment of an emergency body, as if bypassing the traditional structures that are occupied by Moon's potential opponents. Thus, on September 18, 2017, the Committee for Reform of the Prosecutor's Office and the Legal Department under the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Korea recommended the establishment of a body to investigate crimes committed by high-ranking state officials. This recommendation will shortly be formally drafted into a specific bill, as stated by Justice Minister Park Sang-ki. The above-mentioned body can have a staff comprising 122 people, including 50 prosecutors and several dozen investigators. The provisional title is: "Investigative Directorate on Crimes of High-Ranking Civil Servants."

The Office will be empowered to investigate and launch legal proceedings; at the same time, where a case is being investigated simultaneously by the police and the prosecutor's office, the new administration shall preside over that investigation. The objects of the investigation could be the president, the prime minister, heads of courts, members of the state, prosecutors and other high-ranking civil servants, their spouses and close relatives. The office shall
investigate crimes related to the activities of civil servants, including the abuse of authority, the use of blackmail, coercion, interference in elections and others. Particular emphasis shall be placed on the receipt of bribes, the misuse of budgetary funds and other forms of corruption.

The head of the Office may hold office for one three-year term. This head shall be selected by the president from two candidates proposed by a special parliamentary committee. The deputy shall be appointed through a procedure of parliamentary staff hearings.

The discussion on the creation of this "KGB" analog began with Kim Dae-jung, when the so-called "Audit and Inspection Bureau" received extraordinary powers, and, in fact, finally turned out to be an extra-judicial body capable of conducting investigative actions. However, under Lee Myung-bak, this body was disbanded, while Park Geun-hye did not opt for such radical changes, and limited herself to the appointment of special prosecutors. Therefore, within the framework of the anti-corruption agenda and against the backdrop of the scandal of Choi Soon-sil and the rumors that "they have everything bought," Moon Jae-in included the creation of this Office in his pre-election program.

The proposal, however, led to mixed reactions. The Liberty Korea Party objected, citing the fact that there was no need for another supervisory body. The People’s Party and the Justice Party agree with the establishment of the Office, but they consider it inappropriate that its head is appointed by the president, while so many employees are involved in the work. The legal professionals believe that the establishment of the Office should be accompanied by the resolution of the discordance between investigative authorities and political neutrality.

At the same time, there is a certain raid on the prosecutor's office itself, both through the "internal investigations" and through the need to apologize for the crimes of past generations. As the President stated at a ceremony that was held on July 25, 2017 to present the certificate on the appointment of the new Attorney General Moon Moo-il, the prosecutor's office should carry out extensive reforms aimed at increasing political neutrality. The Head of State stated that prosecutors involved in political processes should bear a special responsibility. In response, Moon Moo-il expressed his willingness to reform the public prosecutor's office and promised to monitor the prevention of corruption within the public prosecutor's office.

On August 25, in preparation for the purge, the Commission on the Ethics of Civil Servants of the Republic of Korea provided data on the property owned by officials: the average size of the status of high-ranking officials of the presidential administration, appointed to their posts in May this year, was approximately USD 1.75 million. The status of Moon Jae-in was USD 1.611 million (USD 278,500 more than in 2016). However, the highest status of the head of the policy department of the presidential administration of Chiang Ha-sung was USD 8.2 million.

Secondly, the authorities are trying to take control of the mass media, primarily central broadcasting corporations such as KBS or MBC. As a result, controversy has been escalated in the South Korean political circles over the amendments to the Broadcasting Act, which were originally aimed at increasing the neutrality of state television broadcasting. Their essence was reduced to the introduction of changes in the composition of the boards of directors of the main TV companies so that the uniform distribution of representatives of different political forces within the boards of directors would allow maintaining the neutrality and objectivity of broadcasting. Thus, the number of members of the boards of directors of the KBS and MBC was proposed to be increased to 13 persons, with 7 coming from the ruling party and 6 from the opposition. So far, the Board Of Directors of the KBS consists of 11 people (7 from the ruling party, 4 from the opposition), and the Board of Directors of the MBC is made up of 9 people (6 from the ruling party, 3 from the opposition).

Despite the fact that the bill was proposed before the presidential election at that time by the opposition, and today, the ruling Toburo Democratic Party, President Moon Jae-in publicly has questioned its effectiveness. And although the statement of the president was presented as a purely personal opinion, it was perceived in the political circles as very stern, as it created the impression that the Head of State had completely rejected the bill put forward earlier by his party, offering to further strengthen the control of the authorities over what would be shown on TV and how it would be shown.

Later, the Administration of the President explained that Moon had expressed such an opinion with a view to intensifying the debate on the issue, and had not given any instructions to revise the bill, although the Communications and Telecommunications Committee is proposing this very revision.

Even later, while visiting the Communications and Telecommunications Committee, Moon Jae-in expressed concern on the competitiveness of the RK in the fields of science and technology, including information and communication,
and pointed out that state broadcasting had long been deprived of autonomy and public interest, which had led to a loss in the confidence of the people. This has led to a spiral of assumptions that certain documents have already been signed and, in commenting on the alleged plans for the suppression of the KBS and MBC, leader of the conservatives, Hong Joon-pyo, stated that "had Park Geun-hye signed such a document, the left would probably have demanded that she be shot."

Thirdly, the power structures have begun shaking heavily. In short:

- The pressure on the intelligence services still continues; the new leadership has launched the "Reform Committee" and pulled out enough dirty linen from the times of the conservatives, for what reason Won Sei-hoon was finally imprisoned for real.

- There is a fine game with the army leadership, - the purge is accompanied by an "all-clear signal" for rearmament and ambitious projects; it is also very likely that in the event of a conflict, the Armed Forces of the RK will nevertheless submit to the leadership of the country rather than the American command.

- All the projects of Park Geun-hye, regardless of their usefulness or effectiveness, are being swept under the carpet or re-shaped to look like independent initiatives.

- On the other hand, in both the course of action of the intelligence services and the fight against corruption, Moon has swung not only at Park Geun-hye, but also on other former influential leaders of the right, first of all, former President Lee Myung-bak.

Here, we also note the relaxation of the rules for combating such violations as unauthorized rallies and demonstrations, which can be applied only in the event of a threat to public security. In addition,

- A decision was adopted to minimize the number of denials of requests for the holding of rallies, as previously, local police departments generally refused to grant permission for the holding of demonstrations.

- Water canons will be used only in the event of an imminent threat to important state facilities, and only the chief of the police department of that particular area can authorize the use of water canons. Moreover, the water pressure will be limited, and the water canons should not be directed above the chest level. These measures have been adopted following a resonant fatality event: in 2015, during the dispersal of protesters using a high-powered water canon, 69-year-old farmer Baek Nam-ki was knocked down, hitting his head hard on the pavement. This resulted in his subsequently falling into a coma and never recovering, finally dying on September 25, 2016.

- To block parts of the areas, instead of special transport vehicles (buses that were mobile barriers were often plastered with grease lubricant so that it was impossible to climb over them, such a blocking of the areas caused inconvenience to drivers and pedestrians) a police cordon would be used. The use of special transport vehicles will be allowed only in case of excessive aggression by the participants of mass actions.

- Video and photo capturing of demonstrators will be allowed only for the purpose of investigating unlawful actions, although it is not yet clear how to deal with the surge in the culture of mass actions, whose participants often act too aggressively, and the actions themselves become a source of increased noise.

The author views all of these developments as double-faced. On the one hand, following the rule of the conservatives, many elements of the Korean political culture really require some reform and cleansing. On the other hand, the main motivation for such a cleansing is, in fact, a factional struggle within which, for the successful implementation of his policies, Moon must clear the bureaucracy of his opponents and replace them with his own people. It is not a fact that they will be less susceptible to corruption (however, such scandals usually happen closer to the end of the presidential term) or more competent, but they will definitely be more loyal. Such a comprehensive purge is certainly not an easy task and, since Moon is partly taking on some risky, but desperate, measures, the benefit of the credit of trust is far from being exhausted.

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