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Korea

Revolutionary violence?

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Violence has taken centre stage in South Korean student politics, after two suspected police informers were beaten to death by militants of the radical student union Hanchongnyon. Terry Lawless reports from Seoul.

A five day battle between riot police and student supporters of the National Federation of Student Councils (Hanchongnyon) at Hanyang University in Seoul at the beginning of June led to two deaths, one of which was the result of the torture by students of a man suspected of being police spy.

At the same time, the Namchonghanyon grouping of student organisations in the traditionally radical south western provinces of Cholla, announced that eight of its members were responsible for a similar torture death of a 24 year old man whose battered body was discovered at Chonnam University on May 27.

Organisational crisis

These regrettable events testify to the serious ideological crisis in the organised student movement. Since the August 1996 disturbances at Yonsei University, 40 of the country's 156 student councils have pulled out of the national organisation. An attempt to organise a one day student strike earlier in the spring term to protest the recent political scandals centring on the collapse of the Hanbo chaebol (conglomerate) and accusations of bribery and influence-peddling in high places was largely a failure, with most students choosing to ignore the boycott.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of June 1997, 6,000 students made the trip to Seoul in order to attend the inauguration of the new Hanchongnyon leadership. Violent confrontations occurred because riot police were under orders to prevent the ceremony from taking place. Hanchongnyon had previously been outlawed under the National Security Law as being pro-North Korean, the most serious crime on South Korea's statute books.

Hanchongnyon called a halt to the violent demonstrations when a riot policeman was accidentally crushed by a police vehicle during a riot. But a second man, Lee Suk, died after two Hanchongnyon militants repeatedly beat him to force a confession that he was a police spy. Three students now face murder charges.

Repression

The ruling New Korea Party reacted by ordering the dissolution of Hanchongnyon by the end of July. A government spokesperson suggested that only members of the central leadership of the organisation will be targeted, not member student council participants.

Central students leaders who are still affiliated on August 1st will face prison terms. Prosecutors have said that they will also close all offices of the student group in an effort to enforce the dissolution decree. Ninety-nine prominent Hanchongnyon members are currently on a police wanted list and face overseas travel bans.

Police say that 1,249 students have been questioned and 214 arrested for throwing firebombs or wielding steel bars

during the course of the disturbances. Hanyang University is suing Hanchongnyon for 108.6 million won (\$121,000) in damages.

Myongdong Cathedral, a traditional focal point for student and worker protest, has urged 31 Hanchongnyon members to stop a sit-in protest begun on Thursday June 12 protesting Kim Young-sam's failure to reveal by how much he exceeded the legal financial limit in his successful bid for the presidency in 1992. Myongdong Cathedral has traditionally been off-limits to the police.

Solid support

Police estimate that the core group of Hanchongnyon numbers between 2,000 and 3,000. The organisation still wields considerable influence, particularly in the traditionally radical south-west and at key universities in Seoul.

The defection of 40 students councils is a serious blow, but also means that a large majority of the students councils remain supportive. Only 20 student leaders attended a recent meeting at Joong-ang University in Seoul following the announcement of the first torture death, and demanding that the leadership of Hanchongnyon resign.

It is too early to say whether the recent events mark the impending collapse of the organisation. But the South Korean student movement is clearly in ideological disarray. These recent torture deaths indicate the seriousness of the crisis.

State violence

Ten years after the end of authoritarian rule, the political landscape in South Korea has changed enormously. The country is no longer a police state as the prison terms given to two ex-Presidents partially indicates.

These changes in the political system are affecting the manner in which struggle against the government is carried on, including the legitimacy of violence in student and other protests.

The basic problem is that in spite of the opening of the electoral process and the recent revelations about bribery and corruption, the manner in which the Korean government responds to protest has remained much the same since military rule ended 10 years ago.

Riot police are routinely despatched in large numbers to contain any student or worker political activity. Indeed, the potential force brought into play against students has actually increased recently with helicopters being employed for the first time during last year's disturbances at Yonsei University.

Students and North Korea

It is difficult to know how much the current crisis in North Korea is effecting ideological debate among student activists. Some elements of the student movement do promote a Stalinist vision of socialism. This is hardly surprising. After all, both North and South Korean media call Kim Jong-il's Stalinist monarchy in the North "socialist".

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Some within Hanchongnyon continue to insist that the prominent North Korean defector, Hwang Jong-yop, was the victim of a kidnapping – as North Korea originally argued. Some students also suggest that talk of famine in the North is merely propaganda invented by the South Korean CIA.

Part of the problem is the relative lack of Korean language publications offering alternative viewpoints – and those who publish such material run the risk of imprisonment under the National Security Law.

Violence will continue as long as the regime deploys riot police as a matter of course against the student movement. But student militants themselves must also re-examine their attitude to revolutionary violence, including the treatment of suspected police informers.

One sign of this self-examination is the dissident poster put up by a group of Hanchongnyon supporters at Seoul National University in the days following the first beating death. It read: "The strongest weapon in a student movement lies not in violence, but in the innocent means to attempt to create a society full of love. We must apologise to the people for what took place and make efforts so that such incidents will not happen again."