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South Korean government begins phony reform of military intelligence agency

South Korea announced recently that it would reorganize its military intelligence body, the Defense Security Command (DSC), after it was revealed in early July to have plotted imposing martial law during mass protests last year against former President Park Geun-hye.

Last Monday, the Defense Ministry following President Moon Jae-in's orders launched a new preparatory committee for a body to replace the DSC. The previous Friday Moon announced the replacement of the agency's chief, Lieutenant General Lee Seok-gu, with the supposedly "reform-minded" Lieutenant General Nam Yeong-sin.

Moon "disbanded" the DSC, with the government later saying that all current DSC personnel would be sent back to their units in the army, navy, air force, and marine corps, though some will return to their positions following the "reforms."

However, the fundamentally anti-democratic character of the DSC will not be addressed. Instead, the government is painting the situation as one that can be rectified by the removal of rogue officers or through shuffling staff and positions while leaving the DSC's basic functions untouched.

"We will expeditiously carry out the creation work to ensure that we can complete the DSC reform as soon as possible through re-establishing its mission, function and organizational composition and through personnel reform," the Defense Ministry claimed on Monday.

Other changes being discussed include slashing the number of positions in the agency by approximately 30 percent from the current total of 4,200 and renaming the DSC for the moment as the “military security support command.”

The Defense Ministry is also looking to provide a fig leaf of civilian oversight, claiming that the new agency could be kept in check by assigning a high-level bureaucrat to serve as the head of an audit office. A 70 percent cap will also be placed on the number of military officers occupying top roles, with the remainder going to civilians. The new commander and chief of staff, however, will still be generals.

The new 21-person committee in charge of carrying out these changes is also comprised entirely of military officials, a further indication that the military’s functions in the new agency will not change. A civilian lawyer, Choe Gang-uk, will serve as an advisor to this task force, but he was previously a military lawyer.

None of the roles that reportedly will be assigned to the new unit—internal security, counterintelligence, and collecting and processing military information—are at all different from the previous roles under the DSC.

Furthermore, given the power of the DSC, reforming or disbanding the agency is impossible under the capitalist system. “The Defense Security Command has long been considered the most powerful military organization for decades... I don’t think it would be easy for the DSC to accept the new reality,” an anonymous military official told the South Korean media.

Public anger towards the DSC, the military, and the government broke out in early July when a ruling Democratic Party of Korea member Rhee Cheol-hee made the martial law documents public. The DSC intended to seize power to put down demonstrations and mass protests against then President Park, had they not subsided when she was removed from office, impeached and arrested in March 2017.

These plans included occupying key parts of the capital, Seoul, arresting then-opposition lawmakers in the Democratic Party, censoring the media to prevent the public from learning what was taking place, and petitioning foreign diplomats to recognize the legitimacy of the coup d’état.

In addition, the DSC has also been accused of spying on civilians, namely the families of victims who were killed when the Sewol ferry sank in April 2014. The issue continues to remain politically sensitive, a symbol for many of government incompetence, corruption, and disregard for public welfare as well as an anti-government rallying point.

All of this is par for the course when it comes to the DSC. It has gone by a number of names and re-brandings, tracing its origins back to 1950 during the Korean War when it was a special operations unit under the army, known as the Army Counterintelligence Corps. It was used to preserve loyalty to the regime of Syngman Rhee, who trampled on democratic rights and murdered political opponents.

In 1977, the army unit and its counterparts in the navy and air force were reorganized into a single unit and renamed the Defense Security Command under Park Chung-hee. Future dictator Chun Doo-hwan became head of the DSC shortly before Park's assassination in 1979. He used his position to seize power after Park's death.

In 1990, a whistleblower at the DSC named Private Yun Seok-yang exposed the agency's spying on 1,300 civilians, including students, professors, and politicians. It also included plans for their arrest in the event that martial law was declared. The DSC underwent a name change in Korean (though its English name remained the same), a common tactic the South Korean ruling class uses to cover up its crimes while pretending to enact reforms.

The DSC continued to spy on civilians, according to a civic group that was involved in publicizing the martial law documents in July. The intelligence agency reportedly tapped phone calls between President Noh Moo-hyun when he was in office and his defense minister. The civic group also accused the DSC of collecting information on and surveilling millions of civilians.

Ultimately, regardless of whatever measures Moon's government carries out, he will not touch the framework of the police state that continues to exist in South Korea. His administration, no less than the conservatives whose legacies he claimed he would sweep away, defends the capitalist system and will preserve the repressive state apparatus needed to maintain it.