

Towards a Totalitarian State in South Korea? The “Left Seditious Scandal” and President Park’s “National Security Law”

By [Prof Michel Chossudovsky](#)
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By Kim Bo-geun, director of the Hankyoreh Unification Institute

In September, Unified Progressive Party lawmaker Lee Seok-ki was indicted on charges of plotting an insurrection. His court battle started on Oct. 14 when he requested that his trial be dismissed in his first pretrial hearing. Lee’s arrest on seditious charges has had a significant impact on South Korean society, and it almost overtook the agenda for reform of the National Intelligence Security (NIS).

This is therefore an appropriate time to look back on the events that led to Lee’s situation and take a careful approach in seeking a thorough understanding. Is there anything that South Korea might have missed out, especially considering the unique situation with the divided Korean peninsula?

Sometimes what we see as natural can appear unnatural from an outside point of view or a different angle, and this becomes particularly true when you compare the different viewpoints between inside and outside. A good example could be a situation when universal rights are disrespected with the justification that the case is unique. This means that we may fool ourselves by looking at only trees and thinking that’s all there is, without actually looking at the whole forest.

With this in mind Hankyoreh interviewed Professor Michel Chossudovsky, an emeritus professor of economics at Ottawa University in Canada and founder of the Centre for Research on Globalisation (CRG) regarding Lee Seok-ki’s arrest on seditious charges.



It was believed that outside views could help better understand Lee's case. Professor Chossudovsky is a well-known scholar in South Korea through his publications including, *The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order*, *War and Globalization*, and *Towards a World War III scenario: the dangers of nuclear war*. He has written many books and given lectures that persistently showed his criticism over the imperialistic features of the US and IMF.

Professor Chossudovsky said he has followed Lee Seok-ki's case by reading related articles. His understanding of the 'trees' may not be as deep as what Koreans can grasp directly, but this widely respected scholar could have the good perspective on the 'forest' that Koreans may have missed. The professor said, "Freedom of expression and ideology is absolutely fundamental to the modern democratic society". He strongly criticized by saying this is essentially corroborative evidence that shows South Korean society is working based on a totalitarian system.

Hankyoreh: The first question is - Are you aware of the so-called Lee Seok-ki sedition case?

Chossudovsky: The arrest of Lee Seok-ki on sedition charges has all the appearances of a personal vendetta by President Park against a political opponent within the parliament. It is taking [his] words and building a national security pretext for his arrest. And in that regard it is not the expression of a democratic government but indeed what I would describe as a democratic dictatorship - a totalitarian rule under the disguise of democracy. And essentially it is characteristic of a bygone era of Korean politics, namely that of military rule. This kind of political action is totally at odds with the nature of Korean society, its institutions, its parliament, and to go after political opponents because they are opposed to the head of state and because they expose the fraudulent behavior of the governing party, particularly in relation to the elections, and of course the KCIA's involvement in manipulating the electoral process - this is totally unacceptable in any democratic society. It is reminiscent, as I said, of the heyday of military rule in Korea.

Hani: The National Intelligence Service has alleged that at a gathering of 130 people on May 12, Rep Lee Seok-ki said the following—"All actions in North Korea are patriotic, but they are treason in South Korea"; "We not only need a political situation, but also military"; "Let us counter war. Let us prepare for war. We need political and military preparation"; "We can create a Joseon nation with a self-reliant ideology, a unified ideology, kick out the Americans and create a new, self-reliant society without exploitation or corruption. For this, we need to go all out on a nationwide scale for a decisive battle to construct a new future." Among progressives in South Korea, there are varying responses to the situation.

Rep Lee Seok-ki's group argues that these quotes are all fabricated and falsely attributed. As long as the National Security Law exists, it is understandable why they need to assert this to protect themselves from the law. Progressives who follow the PD line, on the other hand, contend that by arguing that these quotes are fabricated, Lee Seok-ki's group and his lawyers give up the opportunity to assert their right to freedom of ideology. What are your thoughts on this?



Chossudovsky: I can't actually comment on the quotations as they are presented, but I think that to take the statement of a member of the national parliament out of context and accuse him of treason is pushing the analysis of political rhetoric to an unreasonable stage. I think if I read correctly what Lee Seok-ki was saying - is that any kind of critique of the regime in the Republic of Korea of its links to the United States, of the the fact that there are 37,000 troops on Korean soil, that those Korean forces are not under national command but under U.S. command, is an act of treason.

In other words, it is an act of treason to question the legitimacy of the President and the Commander in Chief, both in terms of the election and the relationship between the head of state and the U.S. government. The fact of the matter is that, as it stands, the Republic of Korea is under military occupation, that U.S. military presence has a direct impact on the formulation of policy, the U.S. military controls the Korean military. That is clear because they've signed a joint defense agreement, which grants a four-star U.S. general the de facto

role of Commander in Chief of the ROK, overriding the powers of the President and Commander in Chief, who is Mrs. Park. "To kick out the Americans and create a new self-reliant society without exploitation and corruption" – I cite the words of Rep Lee Seok-ki – is, I think an objective which ultimately should be sought by all Koreans.

There can only be treason when you work for a foreign power against the interests of the Korean people. And what I would say is that Mrs. Park is committing acts of treason, because she is taking her orders directly from the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon.

She does not exercise her duty as a head of state, nor does she exercise her responsibilities as commander in chief, so that she is the person who is committing treason, not Mr. Lee Seok-ki, who is calling for the unification of the Korean nation under a unified ideology without the presence of American troops. It is not a statement that is necessarily embracing a communist ideology by any means. It is a statement which is embracing a unified national identity and ideology, which is entrenched in Korean history. That's the way I see it. Acts of patriotism [are] in relation to the Korean nation, but they cannot be expressed in relation to a divided nation. You cannot be a patriot in relation to the Republic of Korea which is occupied by U.S. troops. You can be a patriot in relation to a unified nation where two countries, which have been divided as a result of the Korean War, are reunited.

Hani: In your opinion, how much should freedom of ideology be allowed in modern society? How important is freedom of ideology for the development of modern society? Should a society coerce people to give up ideology that challenges the status quo or allow it co-exist?

Chossudovsky: I think that freedom of ideology is absolutely essential in modern society. There may be certain political tendencies which you wish to control, such as neo-Nazi elements. But in effect if we look at what's happening in the European Union, even the neo-Nazis have the powers of free expression and they are allowed in the political spectrum. We have to protect freedom of expression but ultimately the freedom to confront political leaders, which is the basis of democracy, the freedom to unseat those leaders if they act in a corrupt or fraudulent way, which is part of the process of impeachments but there are various mechanisms to confront those leaders. And I think that we can look to the experience of other countries. There are certain minimal standards and unfortunately those minimal standards do not prevail under the presidency of President Park in the Republic of Korea.

Hani: How much is freedom of ideology allowed in Canada or the U.S.? The U.S. also experienced extreme anti-communism, as exemplified in McCarthyism. Do you think this is now a thing of the past?

Chossudovsky: I think that in the United States at this moment there is the development of a national security state, or a homeland security state, which is derogating certain fundamental rights. And this is tied into developments, which started under the Bush administration and which continue under the Obama administration. I should mention that in the United States today, there is a U.S communist party, and in Canada there is a Canadian communist party. Canada and the U.S. are not necessarily models of democracy, but people are not normally arrested for expressing their opposition to the government or pointing to corruption and fraud in the election process. And members of the U.S. congress or senators in the United States, and members of parliament and senators in Canada cannot be arrested for criticizing the government.

Hani: How do you see U.S. – North Korea relations? The tensions between North Korea and the U.S. contribute to heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula. What do you think is the fundamental reason why there is no dialogue between the two countries? Is it due to North Korea's nuclear weapons? Or U.S.' imperialist policy?

Chossudovsky: The United States has been threatening North Korea for over 60 years, ok? Certainly since the end of the Korean War, the United States has been threatening North Korea. The United States has also been routinely engineering tension between north and south, preventing a dialogue, preventing a dialogue on trade, cultural exchanges, and sabotaging the reunification process.

It has conducted, almost on an annual basis, war games directed against North Korea, involving South Korean forces and U.S. forces. It has contributed to the political indoctrination of the people of South Korea from primary school onwards. It has rewritten history books. Essentially, it wants to prevent that process of reunification from taking place.

Now with regards to the nuclear threat, the United States has threatened North Korea with nuclear weapons for more than 50 years. We can recall that history. And there's an asymmetry between the United States' capabilities in term of nuclear weapons and those of North Korea. I should mention that if the United States were to use nuclear weapons against North Korea, these would inevitably engulf the entire peninsula, because the demilitarized zone is approximately 50 kilometers from the capital of the Republic of Korea, namely Seoul.

Hani: South Korea has the National Security Law, which outlaws favorable expressions of North Korea as it is defined as an anti-state organization. What are your thoughts on the National Security Law?

Chossudovsky: It's a derogation of the right to freedom of expression. It can be used, it can be construed in any way you want to make it go. It essentially means that South Koreans are not in a position to even express their opinion on what's going on in North Korea, either in a positive or negative sense, or they're only allowed to say negative things.

I think this National Security Law is totally at odds with the workings of a democratic society and it really is, at this stage, obsolete. It goes back to the 1950s. I think we are at the stage when expressing one's views on North Korea at all levels of Korean society is absolutely necessary, because North Korea and South Korea are part of the same cultural and historical entity. They can't be separated out artificially. And it's an issue of the identity of the Korean nation. Whether we say positive or negative things about North Korea is not the issue. The issue is it has to be discussed and debated, because it is part of the heritage of the Korean people.

Hani: Some say that the very existence of the National Security Law makes not only conservatives but even progressives to interpret the situation surrounding Rep Lee Seok-ki in a distorted or conservative way. What are your thoughts on this?

Chossudovsky: I think the substance of this question is that this is the "chilling effect", whereby the arrest of Representative Lee Seok-ki is being used to spearhead an atmosphere of fear and intimidation across the land, throughout the Republic of Korea, so that you have to watch what you say. So you have to apply a form of self-censorship, you have to tow the line, you mustn't say anything against Mrs. Park, ok? It's the chilling effect and I think that was one of the intended effects.

It's not necessarily limited to Representative Lee Seok-ki; it is directed to all progressive elements within Korean society and maybe against everybody, because people are now going to accept the lies as the truth, they're going to accept U.S. occupation, they're going to accept a distorted view of history, they're going to refuse reunification as a concept, which means they're going to deny the Korean nation, its history, its culture.

Essentially that's really what a totalitarian system is all about. It prevents people from thinking, from expressing themselves, from criticizing their leaders. And I would suspect that even conservatives within Mrs. Park's party will also... they will also sway away from any form of critique which they might have even within their own political group. It's what I call the "chilling effect," which is a legal term in British law, and it's very much an element that you want to censor your whole view so that you're not the object of any kind of political repression, so that you essentially tow the line and you sing the government's song. And that's the whole nature of a totalitarian system.

Hani: I guess there's some debate in South Korea about what strategy is appropriate in this situation. So far the Unified Progressive Party has maintained that these quotes are taken out of context, that they have been manipulated and fabricated by the NIS and have been falsely attributed to Lee Seok-ki. Some other progressives are saying, "You shouldn't deny that you said these things, if you said these things. Just assert your right. Even if we may not agree with what you think, you have your right to have your own thoughts and talk about your own ideology." I guess there's a difference in terms of strategy, of how to respond to this situation. So I think they want to know your thoughts on this.

Chossudovsky: When he says "Let us counter war" - I'm assuming these quotes are not taken out of context - "Let us Counter War" or "Let us prepare for war," he is also warning, I would assume, Koreans that their country is occupied by a foreign power. I should mention another thing. The fact that you have 37,000 U.S. troops in Korea has a direct impact on the sovereignty of the government and we saw that in 1997 at the height of the Asian crisis, when the U.S. embassy ultimately demanded - in fact Washington demanded through the U.S. embassy - that the finance minister be sacked, the governor of the central bank be sacked. That was in late '97; it was during an election campaign, and the outgoing government had no other choice but to sack the finance minister and the governor of the central bank and that would not have taken place had there been no U.S. troops on Korean soil.

If he says "we need political and military preparation," I understand that to mean that "we need also to take possession of our own armed forces," because the armed forces of the Republic of Korea are not under the control of the head of state. And it should also be understood that all the weapons which are purchased by the ROK from the United States - advanced weapons systems - are in fact at the service of the United States but they are paid by the Korean taxpayers. Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]

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