

South Korea's High Noon Moment
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Ideological blowout rocks the country

South Korea is boiling. An ideological blowout characterized by some as Korean McCarthyism is rocking the country, with increasing calls for a loyalty oath as a prerequisite for political candidacy.

The opening salvo was ignited by cases of voting fraud by the pro-North Korea United Progressive Party (UPP), the country's third biggest political party, which was caught ghost voting online. That unexpectedly aroused notice because of a few politicians' ideological zealotry.

The two members of the UPP who allegedly were involved in the vote irregularities were not the target of the conservative governing Saenuri Party at the beginning. Their political snipers were a hostile faction within their own party, which rummaged through the opaque primary vote process to catch them. Apparently it was kicked off by the fact that the two refused to abandon their parliamentary seats for more moderate candidates, which angered moderate members within the UPP. The party earned seven geographic constituencies and six proportional seats in the April election.

Now the UPP is badly fractured and in deep trouble, confronted by both internal and external opposition. Internally, the new faction probably has its best chance in years to remove the old one from key posts. Externally, the two lawmakers' rhetorical turn to the North has isolated the party and has set off a fierce behind-the-scenes power struggle between the pragmatic far-leftists and the hardliners. While the hardliners have tried hard to hide their pivot to the North, the deep fissures inside the party have become all too obvious. Indeed, the differences between the factions have never been so glaring to outsiders.

People on the street have been stunned to learn that in addition to refusing to chant the national anthem publicly, the hard-liners have made a fetish of the hopeless North and its *juche* or self-reliance ideology. Most South Koreans aren't aware of these radical ideological underpinnings. Now they have seen the issue spill into the open.

The main opposition Democratic United Party (DUP), which made political common cause with the UPP in the April general elections in an effort to oust the ruling and conservative Grand National Party, is grappling with how to handle the scandal. The DUP, threatened by its own unpopularity with the voters, has joined calls for the two hardliners to step down and is faced with the growing possibility of failure to win the presidential election in December.

The voting irregularities earned ideological scrutiny because of the left's miscalculation on the one hand and on the other because of the right's tireless bashing.

The ruling party has seized on the scandal as a method of shaming the opposition parties into rooting out the North Korea sympathizers at the National Assembly. It is almost impossible to remove the two lawmakers from their seats unless they voluntarily step down. The political greed of the far leftists in attempting to rig the ballots has enlivened the hard right-wing

groups and helped to improve the right's prospects in the December presidential election. The governing party is likely to play the so-called comsymp card to influence the voters.

Park Geun-hye, a shoo-in in the coming presidential election, is reported to have advocated that the two be kicked out from the legislature. A daughter of the late president Park Chung-hee, who was once lionized as the archetype of a modernizing political leadership in military-authoritarian states, she has articulated a fairly common conservative prejudice against the left-wing North Korea sympathizers, who are virulently anti-American and opposed to the ROK-U.S. free trade agreement and the anti-national security law. An icon of South Korean conservatives, Park looked presidential in speaking about the issue both to her followers and the pro-North faction.

Whether Park's conception of the North Korea sympathizers is right, the perspective behind her comment is widely accepted – that a thorough ideological screening system is necessary to lead a free democratic country. In this view, the swaggering of the North Korea-leaning activists is at one with what they regard as failed, flawed and deeply dysfunctional efforts to scrutinize these blind followers.

A friend recently pointed out that the North Korea sympathizers resemble those who insist that the Pentagon was attacked on 9/11 not by a terrorist-piloted American Airlines Flight 77 but rather as a plot by US forces to draw pro-US sympathy across the world. The North Korea sympathizers argue that the torpedoing of the South Korean patrol boat Choenan in 2010 and the bombing of the KAL Boeing 707 in 1987 were not plotted by the leaders of North Korea. The friend added that these ultra-leftist elites see Korea and the US through the prism of the 1980s, which marked the peak of an arrogant, preachy, hypocritical American influence and authority in South Korea.

For these and other reasons, some of the pro-North Korea faction could be viewed as advocating a range of North Korea policies and opposing the traditional views of South Korea. For the opposition parties, thus, the matter of North Korea sympathizers will likely become the tinderbox of the presidential election, given that the conservative ruling party would continue to advocate beat the Red Syndrome drum.

Extreme right-wing leaders are quick to parrot the language of die-hard McCarthyism in espousing an ideological litmus test as a prerequisite for political candidacy. We know from the bleak history of the authoritarian military dictatorship in the past that filtering personal political convictions is hardly perfectly efficient even though the near-hopeless view of the North Korea sympathizers plaguing the country is unhinged.

Nevertheless, the fundamental principle of an ideology is to let it flow freely, like rivers or roads. Block them and they stagnate. While I don't believe that the thread that runs through the right is the failed ideology in a time of polarized politics, it's clear that any future leader of the 'last island of the cold war' should travel a higher road, demonstrating the best hope for putting together again a country that remains ideologically polarized in many ways. Without question, an ideological litmus test approach should be dropped. Instead of putting a gun to a sympathizer's head, dropping this kind of toxic dispute from a presidential candidate's playbook must be the first step the candidate should take.

In 1962, the late Daniel Bell, then a professor emeritus at Harvard University, published a

landmark book called 'The End of ideology.' We don't need to read the book twice. Fifty years are long enough. It's high time to end the old McCarthyism, Korea style, as we know it.

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