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## Report from South Korea

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August 25, 2015

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thanks to state censorship; in the current situation, intense exposure and public discourse create the conditions for self-censorship. Although many lament the treatment of the accused and “personally” have no problem with what they see as a purely symbolic gesture, they do not want to engage in any kind of public solidarity action with the accused out of concern for what others will think and say.

The right wing, though it strongly disapproves, insists that this flag incident is part of a significant political movement. On the other hand, some leftists, even if they have sympathy for the accused, insist that it is not politically significant because it was a spontaneous individual act, not organized in any way. These leftists are afraid that giving importance to this act will play into the hands of the right wing and the establishment, or that it would be disrespectful of the families of the ferry accident victims, or something else of that nature. Even many anarchists do not seem to recognize this as significant, failing to see the strategic importance of this kind of symbolic struggle.

This message is intended to start an exchange. Let’s figure out something new together.

## The Burnt Flag

Spring 2015. The issue of further social democratization and national independence remains important—for example, in the struggles (with anarchists at the forefront) against the expansion of military bases and their connection to a global network. Yet the large demonstrations held on May Day this year exemplify the trend following the democratization of the '90s towards a plurality of social movements: labor, feminism, queer, ecology. Besides a general sense of solidarity and opposition to the current regime, one of the few focal points seemed to be support for the families of the victims of a ferry accident last year, who are struggling for transparency against the authorities' apparent cover-up. For many, this ferry incident symbolizes the sacrifice of the young generation to the logic of the system, to corrupt authorities, though there is hardly a clear understanding or unanimity around what precisely the problem is. This year's May Day demonstration was preceded by a week of protests about this ferry incident. Culminating on April 18, violent clashes erupted as the police tried to isolate the families of the victims, who had been occupying a strategic public place near the presidential palace for weeks, from the rest of the massive crowd.

Nevertheless, while tens of thousands people were gathered in the streets, while more than 70 police buses were damaged and more than 70 police officers injured, the incident that took the central place in almost all the corporate media was that one person burnt a national flag. Isn't all this attention focused on a single burnt flag just the deplorable result of right-wing influence on the establishment seeking to divert public attention from more important issues?

The state used this incident to launch a search on the "affiliations" of the criminal, since burning the national flag is a criminal offense. However, much of the repression was not carried out by the state, but rather through voluntary, public, diffuse action. In the past, dissident political activities were scarcely reported on,

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## The Contested Flag

May 1980, Gwangju. For decades after the defeat of the Japanese Empire, South Korea was ruled by US-backed military dictatorships that claimed to represent the free Korean nation, as opposed to the North Korean “communist” regime. A strong social movement in the South contested this narrative, calling for another nationalism and democratization, culminating in a major insurrection. However, news of this rebellion was censored by the state-controlled media establishment. Even though the large city of Gwangju fought off the military for days of self-organized rebellion, the outside public informed by the mass media only briefly heard about a clash involving North Korean commandos.

Through out the 1970s and '80s, social movements were largely united around these linked themes of nationalism and social democratization (with some accents of socialism); the only major conflicts were over whether to prioritize democratization (in the South) or independence, anti-US resistance, and reunification (with the North).

At the end of the '80s, after continuing social unrest, the regime began to transition to a more liberal democratic form. The struggles of the preceding decades, such as the Gwangju Uprising, became celebrated hallmarks of the nation's progress. However, the first democratic transition of the presidency to the opposition party in 1998—which many people saw as representing victory over authoritarian establishment—coincided with the onset of a major financial crisis and a painful structural adjustment program from the IMF. Following a decade with this liberal party in power, the party that ruled autocratically for decades has come back into power, this time more or less democratically, declaring it is time to end the ideological conflicts of the past. The current president is the daughter of the dictator who ruled South Korea for two decades.

dividing it up between the USA in the South and the USSR in the North.

Here, we will explore the complex historical relationship between nationalism and social movements in Korea. Western anarchists acting in solidarity with people in Korea should be careful not to be perceived as preaching a universalism that disregards local matters—that, like capitalism, dislocates everything. Our efforts could backfire, reinforcing a xenophobic nationalist collectivism. At the same time, fearing this makes many “foreigners” living here dilute their politics and restrain themselves to a passive ally position. This can be stifling; we hope collectively to find a way to overcome that.

## The Forbidden Flag

March 1<sup>st</sup> 1919 marked the beginning of the 3.1 Manse Movement. Under Japanese colonial occupation, the expression of Korean national identity was repressed. The school system only taught the Japanese language and Japanese history. On this day, a movement to hold the Korean flag in public places began and was brutally repressed. Nevertheless, it ignited resistance. Korean nationalists-turned-anarchists developed a range of initiatives over the following decades—opening free radical schools, organizing self-managed and self-sustained rural communities on the periphery of the Japanese Empire, creating coalitions across the ethnic and political borders of the region, organizing guerrilla groups, committing targeted assassinations, and more.

The demonstrations that started on March 1, 1919 involved the display of the current South Korean flag and the slogan “Manse!” (만세, “Long Live”). Could we consider the burning of this Korean flag an act of re-appropriation?

*We received the following report and request from our comrades in South Korea, who recently published a Korean version of *To Change Everything* and are active in a variety of struggles there.*

Starting in spring, the anarchist appeal *To Change Everything* was adapted into Korean and distributed in paper and online in South Korea. Many welcomed it; the first printing ran out quickly.

It also provoked a strong reaction when the country’s major corporate news agency reported on it and on a project appearing on the appeal’s blog to gather and distribute songs against the National Security Law. The journalist even went to the prosecutor’s office, inquiring whether these activities constituted “aid to the enemy” (in other words, treason), which is what the National Security Law targets. The official’s response was that the answer “depends on an eventual analysis of whether this is part of an intention to threaten the national order.” In the corporate media, the numerous comments posted online with the article expressed a unanimous condemnation of these “pro-North Koreans” that we supposedly are (ignoring the “anarchist” reference), demanding even severer laws and repression. For example, “These pro-North Koreans should be sent to the good old ‘re-education camp’ to be reminded the fact that this country is still at war.”

This stir in the corporate media and the right-wing movement it fuels coincided with another one: a little witch-hunt following the arrest, investigation, and prosecution of someone on charges of having burned a Korean flag. On April 18, as a movement in response to the authorities’ cover-up of a ferry disaster last year converged in downtown Seoul, an exasperated youngster, provoked by journalists, picked up a paper national flag left on the ground and lit it on fire, making headlines in corporate media. Based on “CCTV and other evidence,” the police arrested him in the following days in another city. Using a warrant for search and seizure to discover his “affiliations,” the police raided his housing collective—which happens to be a center for diverse autonomous social movements

including some recent anarchist activities, though the arrestee is not connected to them.

Though this kind of police repression combined with corporate and right-wing fervor is nothing new in this state of suspended civil war, this is a sign of what many feel to be a worsening political climate. Some Korean anarchists feel that we are isolated in a tightly controlled island, a prison. Nevertheless, by all means necessary, we must show that we are not so isolated.

## A Call to Action

This wave of quasi-fascist nationalism provides an opportunity for inter-/anti-national solidarity actions to strategically provoke and subvert it. Here is a proposition for a simple action that, though it doesn't entail much risk for participants outside Korea, could take advantage of that opportunity. It might even be fun.

Together, let's defy the Korean National Security Law (국안법). Show solidarity with Korean people while expressing hostility to the Korean states and the order they incarnate. Through the image of "non-Koreans" attacking the symbols of the Korean state in solidarity with "Koreans," let's break down national divisions and the link between ethnicity and the state. Let's take "outside agitation" to a new level.

Any format would do—but, because some images don't need translation, accomplishing this visually by burning flags could be the simplest way. Don't be misunderstood for a pro-North Korean (burn the northern flag too), a xenophobic nationalist (burn the flag of your own country), or an ideologue (burn an anarchist black flag if you want).

If you want to take your action to a relevant public space, don't limit yourself to the Korean embassies. The major conglomerates Samsung, Hyundai, and LG together represent well over half of the South Korean economy, and their overseas offices can be con-

sidered places of state affairs. Korean cultural products are also understood as a spearhead of the economy because they are linked to IT products; the media pays great attention to overseas reactions to them.

As a slogan, one option is **안정 무정부** / mujeongbu tong-il, meaning "no-government" (a common translation of anarchy) + "reunification."

**안정!** (Manse) Long live anarchy!

## Why Korea? Why Struggle on the Terrain of Nationalist Discourse?

Military conflict transforms public discourse into Left/Right or patriot/traitor dichotomies that effectively exclude anarchist perspectives. Examples of this abound, recently including the Ukrainian uprising and subsequent Russian invasion. This problem is especially acute in the Koreas, since the Korean peninsula is a hotspot in the lingering cold war and a point of confrontation for two major blocs, China and the United States.

Regarding the question of nationalism, Korea could be considered an archetypical nation-state, identified with a territory that has been stable for thousands of years, a unique language and culture, and a large yet homogenous population. If we are to confront the myth of the nation-state, a place like Korea is a challenge.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-identified nationalist-anarchists were at the forefront of the resistance to the Japanese occupation; a group of them even formed an important part in the so-called Korean temporary government at the end of the Japanese colonial period, though it never actually ruled. Their principal goal then was a united independence, as they could foresee the terrible consequences of foreign states—the "liberating allies"—making Korea into a client state, or, worse,