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## Summer of discontent

Posted by Zia - 2008/06/12 02:11

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THERE was little to celebrate as South Korea's president, Lee Myung-bak, marked his hundredth day in office this week. The president's approval rating is 21%, a fall of 31 points since his inauguration, according to Gallup, a pollster. Month-long protests against a decision to resume imports of American beef have grown in size and intensity. Many of the tens of thousands of people who gather nightly outside Seoul's City Hall call for Mr Lee's resignation.

The president's aides and his own right-wing Grand National Party confess they are worried about rising public discontent. Dong A, a conservative newspaper, marked Mr Lee's 100 days in office with a picture of summer storm-clouds louring over the Blue House, the office and residence of the president.

Mr Lee has only himself to blame for his abrupt fall from grace. Since his landslide victory in December, he has adopted an imperial style of leadership reminiscent of his days as chief executive of various arms of Hyundai, a conglomerate. Ignoring calls from many in South Korea for a more conciliatory style, he has pushed a controversial scheme to construct a system of canals. He has alienated civil servants by publicly berating them and threatening to cull their numbers in the interests of efficiency. And he has told state-run corporations they will be privatised, replacing many of their bosses with his loyalists.

In an effort to repair frayed ties with America, Mr Lee agreed in April to lift a ban on imports of American beef, which were suspended in 2003 after the discovery of mad-cow disease among cattle. South Koreans reacted furiously to the move. Housewives, pensioners, businessmen and students took to the streets in protest. Mr Lee was initially dismissive. His police chief warned protesters they needed a permit and would be arrested. That served only to fuel public anger.

This week a contrite Mr Lee said he would listen to the public's concerns. The Blue House has dropped hints of a cabinet shuffle. Among those expected to be replaced is the agriculture minister. Even Mr Lee's own party wants his decision-making to become more transparent. But none of South Korea's political parties seems to be trusted by a public concerned about rising prices and the uncertain economic outlook. The main opposition United Democratic Party has yet to recover electoral support after suffering devastating losses in April's parliamentary elections. Even a UDP spokesman puts the party's approval rating at less than 20%.

Meanwhile America is expressing frustration at what it sees as its ally's unfounded fear of its beef. This week South Korea's government said it wanted to renegotiate the beef-import agreement. A Gallup poll found that 81% of Koreans support for this. But Mr Lee has much else to do to reclaim confidence in his leadership, and dispel the clouds gathering over the Blue House.

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