

International

Anti-feminism backlash on the rise in South Korea

Young women organizing a widespread #MeToo and anti-spycam movement

SEOUL: Condemnation of quotas for women, vilification of a short-haired Olympic gold medalist, and calls to abolish the gender ministry itself: A backlash against feminism is on the rise in South Korea—with even presidential candidates joining in. While South Korea is the world's 12th-largest economy and a leading technological power, it remains a male-dominated society with a poor record on women's rights.

That has been challenged in recent years, with young women fighting to legalize abortion and organizing a widespread #MeToo and anti-spycam movement that led to the largest women's rights demonstrations in Korean history. At their most militant some campaigners have vowed to never marry, have children, or even have sex with men, while others have gone viral smashing up their make-up products on video in protest against the country's demanding beauty standards.

Ferocious online campaigns

Now a fierce reaction is spreading online. Members of anti-feminist groups, often right-wing, have even bullied triple Olympic champion An San during the Tokyo Games for having short hair, and demanded she hand back her medals and apologize. One such group's YouTube channel has drawn more than 300,000 subscribers since its foundation in February, and their online campaigns can be ferocious.

They have extracted apologies from compa-

nies—and even a government ministry—for using images of pinching fingers in advertising, which they claim “extreme, misandrist feminists”. And leading mainstream conservative politicians—including two presidential contenders—have seized on the wider anti-feminist sentiment with pledges to abolish the gender ministry.

Critics accuse the department of “deepening” the country's social tensions, with young men claiming equality policies fail to address issues that affect men. They say it is especially unreasonable that only South Korean men have to perform near two-year compulsory military service, delaying their career starts in a highly competitive society, while women are exempt.

Lawmaker Ha Tae-keung, who is seeking presidential nomination by the conservative opposition People's Power Party (PPP), says the ministry is obsolete and told AFP that it needed to be disbanded to reduce the “enormous social cost caused by conflict over gender issues”. In an earlier television appearance, he told broadcaster MBC: “It's like a zombie—the ministry's still around although it's already dead, and that's why it's only creating adverse effects.”

'Backlash to progress'

Sharon Yoon, a Korean studies professor at University of Notre Dame in the US, said: “What we are seeing now is a very powerful backlash to all of the progress that feminist movements in Korea have made in the past few



SEOUL: This file photo taken on August 20, 2020 shows people wearing face masks as they prepare to cross a street in Seoul. South Korea has the highest gender wage gap in the OECD club of developed countries. — AFP

years.” Lee Jun-seok, the PPP's 36-year-old leader, has established himself as one of the most popular politicians among the country's young men.

He has repeatedly said he is against gender quotas and “radical feminism”, and that the gen-

der equality and family ministry needs to be scrapped. Lee, who has been compared by some to former US president Donald Trump for his at times divisive rhetoric, insists the country's young women no longer face discrimination in education, nor in the early career job market. — AFP

Thousands rescued as Ganges floods in India

ALLAHABAD: Thousands of stranded Indians were rescued yesterday from flooded villages along the Ganges after the river rose above its danger level in the country's most populous state.

The waterway surged to two meters (6.5 feet) above normal in the city of Allahabad, which has experienced its worst flooding in decades after days of torrential rain. Across Uttar Pradesh state more than 600 villages were reportedly cut off by the rising waters, prompting a major rescue effort by authorities. M.P. Singh, a district magistrate in Allahabad, told AFP that 225 boats had been sent out to help people trapped on rooftops and the upper floors of their homes. He estimated 4,500 people had been rescued in and around the city.

About 100 kilometers (60 miles) downriver in the holy city of Varanasi, the ghats—ceremonial piers used for Hindu cremations on the river—were flooded and closed. Varanasi magistrate Sanjay Kumar said the river was one meter (3.3 feet) above its danger mark in the area and thousands of people had been rescued. Normally the ghats operate 24 hours and handle hundreds of cremations each day. — AFP

Car 'graveyard' a monument to the power of China's record floods

BEIJING: Endless rows of mud-caked vehicles damaged by deadly floods last month sit abandoned in a parking lot in Zhengzhou, an unwitting memorial to the power of the disaster that hit Henan province. The region is rebuilding after the deadliest floods in a decade wreaked havoc across the province mid-July, killing over 300 people and damaging thousands of cars and buildings.

“We were forced to abandon our vehicles and leave when the waters rose,” a Zhengzhou resident surnamed Wang said. At least 238,000 damaged vehicles have been sent to ‘graveyards’ like the one in the outskirts of Zhengzhou, head of Henan's insurance regulator Ma Chao told state broadcaster CCTV on Tuesday. Record downpours dumped a year's worth of rain on Zhengzhou—the capital of Henan province and the epicentre of the flooding—in just three days, with over 290 people killed.

Dozens of people died while trapped in flooded subway carriages, underground car parks and tunnels.

The floods also triggered record insurance claims worth \$1.7 billion after thousands of cars and buildings were damaged, insurer Goldman Sachs said in a July report. The local government last week said economic losses due to the floods have ballooned to over \$20.65 billion and promised swift compensation. But crit-



ics say the process has been painfully slow.

Resident Wang, who lost his car, added: “Now getting compensation has become a real headache with dozens of forms to fill in.” A landmark UN study released Monday warned that northern China was prone to more freak weather events, including heavy floods and punishing droughts, due to climate change. — AFP