South Korea’s new president came to power on the back of protests, with promises of more tolerance for future ones. Before the end of his first year Steven Borowiec asks if he’s being true to his word
if that committee is able to get changes into law, the landscape of protest in South Korea could be permanently altered to give protesters greater leeway.

Since 1968, the road outside the Blue House had been closed to protesters from 8pm to 5.30am each day, ostensibly due to security concerns. And while not formally illegal, police would disperse or deny permission to hold tests in the vicinity of the Blue House.

In June, President Moon Jae-in lifted the night time public access ban and allowed small protests to go ahead in gestures he said were meant to make government more accessible to citizens.

Street protests have a special relevance for the Moon administration. Moon was elected in May after a protest movement led to the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye, who was accused of corruption (she is now on trial). As such, Moon has pledged to yield to public demands to undo limits on freedom of assembly and expression that had accrued under the nine years of right-wing administrations led by Park and her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak.

Moon, a former human rights lawyer and activist, was a fixture at protests around the country before becoming president. Many of his most enthusiastic supporters are protesters who backed Moon in part because he has a track record of spirited activism himself.

Whether Moon will follow through on those promises or not remains to be seen. Almost half a year into Moon’s five-year-term, South Korean activists say protest conditions have improved, but plenty of work remains.

In September, Amnesty International released a report on the policing of assemblies in South Korea, which accused police of “excessive and unnecessary use of force”, “dispersal of peaceful assemblies” and “criminalisation of peaceful assemblies” between 2013 and 2016, before the Moon administration took office. The report is less a summary of its predecessors’ legacy, which Moon has pledged to reform.

Activists on the ground do say that, under Moon, the heaviest police tools to restrict protest have not been deployed.

“Moon has stopped the most unnecessary kinds of repression of protest. After the Moon government was inaugurated there have been no bus barricades or water cannons at protests. And under the previous government it wasn’t possible to have press conferences or small gatherings in front of the Blue House,” said Ryu Mikyung, international director for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, one of South Korea’s largest umbrella unions.

Protests are an almost daily occurrence in Seoul and are a key part of South Korea’s political discourse. Social change in South Korea has almost always come via protest movements, most notably during the democratisation movements of the late 1980s. Since then, there have been other spirited movements – particularly against the US military presence in 2002 and the movement that ousted Park last year – all of which were characterised by tension between citizens on the ground and police with authoritarian instincts.

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The national debate over protests reached its emotional peak in September 2016 after the death of farmer Baek Nam-gi. Baek had been in a coma for 10 months after being knocked over by the stream from a police water cannon during an anti-government protest in Seoul. South Korea’s liberal opposition seized on Baek’s case as emblematic of what it called the heavy-handed handling of dissent by the Park Geun-hye government. Photos of a soaked Baek lying...
unconscious on his back in the middle of a road were widely shared on South Korean social media and came to symbolise what some called the regression of democracy in the country.

Clashes with police happen across the political spectrum. In March, for example, two right-wing protesters were arrested for assaulting police during a pro-Park Geun-hye gathering outside Park’s private residence in Seoul.

Against such a backdrop, Moon came into office promising to defuse tensions on the streets, but rancour between protesters and police has not fully abated. Baek Gayoon, a member of the Police Reform Committee of People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, a major South Korean civic group, said that with Moon in power, there have not been the kind of massive protests seen last year, but there are still ongoing, local struggles.

The most intense such protest is taking place in Seongju, a village near the site where the USA and South Korea are deploying a missile defence system known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense. Local residents are resisting the deployment, arguing that hosting the system could make the village a target for North Korean missiles, and that Thaad’s radar system could emit harmful radiation. The US and South Korean governments argue that Thaad is a prudent defensive measure against North Korea’s growing arsenal of missiles (see Index Spring 2017, 46.01, p.45-47).

In September, there were violent clashes between protesters and police in Seongju, which Baek described as a sign that police remained willing to use force to disperse protesters. “There is still a lack of trust between police and civil society,” Baek said in an interview.

On the same day as the Amnesty report was released in September, the police issued a press release, which — without directly addressing any of Amnesty’s criticisms — pledged to “approach protests from the viewpoint of guaranteeing and realising the basic human rights stipulated in the Constitution, rather than focusing on control and management”.

Ranghee, a spokesperson for Police Watch, a coalition of civic activists advocating police reform, welcomes the Moon government’s early changes, but said it is too early to celebrate. Having been in office less than a year, Moon is still in something of a honeymoon period. “The Moon government hasn’t yet been tested by a large, anti-government protest. The next step is to revise the relevant laws so that the right to peaceful demonstration is more robustly guaranteed, and police response to demonstrations is not left to their discretion,” Ranghee told Index.

Back in Seoul, protests continue, including ones in November against US President Donald Trump’s visit to South Korea.

On a smaller scale, a middle-aged woman, surnamed Kim, stands on the road leading to the Blue House carrying a placard calling on Moon to investigate a recent case of a property she owned being taken over by a major construction company. She said she didn’t receive adequate compensation for her property and that she has been left paying exorbitant rent for a similar place in the same area.

“I’ve become a beggar,” Kim said, as she used a black marker to bold the text on her placard. When asked why she had chosen the road to the Blue House as the location for her protest, she said, “This was as close to the president as I could get. I just want to make my voice heard.”

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