

South Korea revokes 198 awards tied to coups, martial law, and state abuses.

Cabinet strips medals from figures tied to May 18 crackdown, framed spy-cases and martial law abuses.

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The government on the 21st canceled 198 decorations that had been awarded to 167 people involved in state violence cases. State violence cases refer to the Dec. 12 military coup, those involved in May 18 and martial law duties, and fabricated spy cases. Former inspector Lee Geun-an, known as a "torture technician," and former senior superintendent general Park Cheo-won, who led the downplaying and cover-up of the torture death of Park Jong-cheol, were included.



Choi Ji-ja (Tomoko Nakagawa), the daughter of the late Choi Chang-il, a victim of the fabricated spy case against Korean residents in Japan, speaks to the press after her late father, indicted for violating the National Security Act, is acquitted in a retrial at the Seoul High Court in Seocho-dong, Seocho-gu, Seoul. /Courtesy of News1

Related agencies have identified ineligible recipients among government honorees through agency-wide audits and have proceeded with the process to cancel the awards. Afterward, at a Cabinet meeting held that day, the draft plan to revoke honors, which included canceling government awards, was reviewed and approved, finalizing the list of those whose government awards would be canceled.

The government plans to continue identifying and canceling government awards that were received for inappropriate merits. The cancellation of government awards given for unconstitutional acts such as the suppression of the May 18 Democratization Movement and the Samcheong Reeducation Camp is already additionally underway.

◇ 76 people commended for national security and martial law duties found to have "false merits"

The Ministry of the Interior and Safety held a briefing at Government Complex Seoul with the Ministry of National Defense, the Korean National Police Agency, and the National Intelligence Service on the "announcement of canceling government awards for those involved in unconstitutional acts and fabricated spy cases" and stated accordingly.

The Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS), which oversees state decorations, has worked with each related agency to cancel inappropriate government awards to those involved in unconstitutional acts and fabricated spy cases that do not meet public expectations. The Ministry of National Defense, the Korean National Police Agency, and the National Intelligence Service (NIS) analyzed various materials, including decoration records and Cabinet meeting records received from the MOIS, and proceeded with related administrative procedures for canceling government awards.

First, the Ministry of National Defense identified 76 people who illegally or unjustly received orders and medals for military merit from 1980 to 1981. Of these, 42 were national security honorees and 34 were martial law duty honorees.

The Ministry of National Defense named Cho Hong, Choi Seong-rip, and Baek Un-taek as three key figures for government award cancellation. Lee In-gu, personnel planning director at the Ministry of National Defense, said, "There is a commemorative photo taken by 34 people in front of the Security Command headquarters," and added, "These three are the main figures in the photo."

All those subject to cancellation by the Ministry of National Defense were found to have "false merits," as specified in Article 8 of the Decorations Act. Director Lee said, "A full audit of the 42 national security honorees' service records and anti-espionage operation records at the time confirmed that they received decorations despite having no merits such as performing duties equivalent to combat or dedicating and striving for national defense."

He went on, "The state of emergency martial law at the time has been definitively judged by the courts as 'subversion of the constitutional order and insurrection,' and therefore does not meet the requirements for orders and medals for military merit," adding, "The duties performed by the Martial Law Command and its subordinate units aided the new military regime's illegal seizure of power and insurrection and cannot constitute merits."

◇ 91 people involved in state violence cases, including fabricated spy cases, have 122 awards canceled

The Korean National Police Agency and the National Intelligence Service (NIS) identified a total of 122 awards for 91 people involved in state violence cases, including fabricated spy cases, which occurred from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Starting in March, the Korean National Police Agency conducted a full audit of about 100,000 government awards conferred since its establishment. Among them, it moved to cancel a total of 36 awards received by 20 people involved in cases where illegal acts such as unlawful arrest, harsh treatment, and repression of the democratization movement were

confirmed. The awards to be canceled are 15 orders, 3 medals, 12 presidential commendations, and 6 prime minister's commendations.

Kim Byeong-chan, personnel planning director at the Korean National Police Agency, said, "A representative case is the Nam Min-jeon case, in which more than 80 people were arrested in 1979 on charges including violating the National Security Act. In retrials in 2024 and 2025, illegal acts such as unlawful detention and harsh treatment at the time were recognized, and acquittals were finalized." The Nam Min-jeon case involved the arrest of members of the Preparatory Committee for the South Joseon National Liberation Front and related subordinate organizations.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) also conducted a full audit of government awards conferred on staff since the creation of its predecessor, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. As a result, it identified 19 cases investigated by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and the Agency for National Security Planning in which illegal acts such as violations of investigative procedures or human rights abuses were revealed.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) proceeded with the cancellation process for 86 decorations, commendations, orders and medals, presidential commendations, and prime minister's commendations—awarded to 71 people involved in these cases. The NIS is currently reviewing whether to revoke honors in matters that require further investigation, and plans to promptly proceed with cancellation procedures if it confirms retrial acquittal cases in the future or finds additional award recipients related to existing cancellation cases.