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CONFRONTING POLITICAL CHANGE IN SOUTH KOREA

INTRODUCTION

Clashes between government and opposition political parties in the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) erupted anew in the past year. The dispute centered on proposed revisions of the ROK constitution. The administration of President Chun Doo Hwan called for creation of a parliamentary form of government headed by a prime minister chosen by the national legislature, while the opposition demanded a presidential system allowing for direct popular election of the chief executive.

This debate has raged for more than one year. At times the clash became violent. Then, with the ROK presidential election scheduled to take place late this year under the existing constitution's electoral college system, Chun halted the debate last month by calling for a moratorium on the revision debate until after he leaves office in February 1988. This has hurtled relations between opposing political camps to their lowest ebb in recent years and raised opposition threats to boycott the upcoming election.

Reshuffled Cabinet. To adjust to the changing political climate as well as prepare for this fall's presidential campaign season, Chun on May 26 announced a major reshuffling of his cabinet. The changes seem designed to sustain Chun's political strength and stability as he moves into the final nine months of his tenure.

These escalating political tensions in the ROK have focused considerable American attention on the state of U.S.-ROK economic, political, and strategic relations. There is growing American concern that worsening ROK political tensions and domestic strife could endanger vital U.S. economic and strategic interests in Korea and East Asia. Chief among the dangers is the possibility that communist North Korea may move to take advantage of instability in the South.

In addition to strategic concerns is the ROK's mounting economic importance. Last year, U.S. trade with the ROK exceeded that with France or Italy, making South Korea the seventh largest U.S. trading partner. U.S. exports to the ROK in 1986 were \$6.4 billion, while U.S. imports from ROK were \$13.8 billion. Vital U.S. economic interests are at stake on the peninsula.

Avoiding Direct U.S. Involvement. Reagan Administration policies as well as recent congressional actions have forged a reasonable consensus on U.S. policy toward the South Korean political situation. At the heart of this policy is the U.S. determination to avoid direct involvement in ROK domestic politics. It is believed, for instance, that casting U.S. support for one side or another would merely toughen one side's bargaining stance toward the other. Similarly, it is generally accepted that any linkage between ROK politics and U.S.-ROK security and trade relations would be ineffective or even potentially dangerous. The U.S. should continue to follow these general policy guidelines.

In a few areas, the policy should be altered somewhat to conform to the changing ROK political scene. For one thing, Washington should commend the Chun government for its recent pledge to take specific reform steps in lieu of constitutional revision. For another, the U.S. should urge the opposition groups in the ROK to participate in the reform efforts. The Chun government also should be encouraged to move forward on these and other basic democratic measures.

At the same time, Washington should speak out clearly in support of a fair election this fall for the ROK's next president and of a free political atmosphere allowing equitable competition among the candidates. Finally, the U.S. should continue to commend President Chun for his important contribution to the evolution of democracy in the ROK by his pledge to step down from power when his presidential term expires next February. This will be the first peaceful transfer of power in Korea's modern history.

THE ROK'S MODERN POLITICAL ROOTS

Today's South Korean political developments are rooted in the ROK's turbulent modern history. The ROK was born out of chaos. Japan's surrender in August 1945 ended 35 years of that country's harsh colonial rule over the Korean peninsula. Koreans then faced the tragic partition of their country and the challenge of self-government. In 1948, after three years of U.S. military rule, the ROK was established. But unlike Japan, which had a democratic system of government imposed upon it by the U.S., Washington by and large left the ROK to fend for itself.

Syngman Rhee in 1948 was elected the ROK's first president under a democratic constitution. By the mid-1950s, however, he was growing increasingly authoritarian. After the rigged March 1960 presidential election, he was toppled by a university student uprising after a month of bloody rioting. For the most part, Rhee failed to initiate real democratization or even economic development in the ROK.

Park Chung Hee. Rhee was followed by a one-year experiment with a parliamentary form of government, headed by Prime Minister Chang Myon. His administration was plagued by factionalism, student activism, and economic deterioration and was overthrown

by a military coup led by General Park Chung Hee in 1961. For most of the next two decades, Park ruled the ROK. Korean history books will forever remember him correctly as the father of the ROK "economic miracle," which raised Korean living standards and unleashed entrepreneurship and mobility. On the important political front, however, Park did little more than Rhee to foster democratic development. By the late 1970s, he had usurped virtually all political power. Social unrest in 1979 led to his assassination by one of his closest aides.

Park's death created an enormous political vacuum. Although a state of martial law was declared immediately following the assassination, bitter fighting among rival politicians together with the worst economic slump in 16 years left the ROK in chaos. To restore order, the military, led by Defense Security Command head General Chun Doo Hwan, intensified martial law conditions and prohibited virtually all political activities. Among other reasons for taking this action, Chun cited a mounting North Korean military threat. A new constitution was adopted in late 1980, and in early 1981, Chun was elected president.

THE FIFTH REPUBLIC EXPERIENCE

While there are some calls today for the "restoration" of democracy in South Korea, the fact is that restoration is the wrong word; Koreans have experienced precious little democracy. The ROK's chaotic history had seen little but authoritarianism and the politics of confrontation.

The ROK has made progress toward political development under the Chun Administration. A major achievement will be the peaceful transfer of executive power scheduled for next February. When it occurs, it will be unprecedented in ROK history. The current constitution calls for a single-term, seven-year presidency and stipulates that no amendment to this limitation may apply to the president in office at the time of the change. Thus, the hallmark of Chun's Administration is its pledge to end the perpetuation of rule by a single individual.

Gradual Liberalization. While Chun keeps a tight grip on the broadcast media and political activity in general, he has allowed slow and gradual liberalization. The opposition New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) created by the ROK's two most prominent opposition leaders, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, is a case in point. In the National Assembly elections in early 1985, the NKDP emerged as the largest and most outspoken opposition bloc in the legislature, precisely because the ROK government had eased political restrictions.

The key change sought by the NKDP was elimination of the electoral college system. NKDP leaders charged that the system could easily be manipulated by the government and called for a constitutional amendment allowing for direct election of the next president.

When the Chun government refused to discuss constitutional revision, the NKDP took to the streets in February 1986 with rallies in major cities supporting basic law reform. Various religious and social organizations supported the NKDP's position. On April 30, 1986, Chun unexpectedly declared his support for any constitutional change endorsed in the National Assembly, saying that if such changes were to win Assembly approval, a new

constitution could be in place by late this year, when the next election will be held. While some questioned his real intentions, Chun's announcement represented a 180-degree shift in the government's position. Such developments revealed the Chun government's responsiveness to public sentiment, a characteristic not altogether common in the ROK's past.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL STANDOFF

The main opposition New Korea Democratic Party predictably proclaimed its solid support for democratization. The party was plagued, however, by the longstanding rivalry between Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, who control the NKDP's two largest factions. In addition, several minor factions and independents produced a multiplicity of intraparty views regarding the party's political strategy in the constitutional debate.

In particular, there were fundamental disagreements over the system of government most appropriate for South Korea. Most camps lined up behind either a presidential or a parliamentary form while some supported a "dual executive" system, which would split domestic and foreign policy responsibilities. Under a presidential system, the head of government is directly or indirectly elected by popular vote, while a parliamentary system provides for a prime minister elected by the national legislature. Kim Young Sam was once an outspoken advocate of the parliamentary form of government.

Opposition Successes. Whatever their differences, most opposition members wanted to revise the current Fifth Republic constitution in a manner ensuring fair national elections, improving opposition access to the government decision-making process, and expanding basic civil liberties. To avoid divisive wrangling over opposing blueprints for reform, the NKDP chose as its rallying point the call for a presidential system based on direct national elections.

Using any yardstick, the early stage of the opposition's offensive was successful. Throughout 1985, the Chun government took a very hard line, refusing even to discuss constitutional reform. Chun said that discussion about such reforms would have to wait until he left office in 1988. In response, the NKDP launched a petition campaign and held a series of rallies advocating constitutional revision. These actions attracted significant domestic support and foreign encouragement. When the ROK government declared the signature drive unconstitutional, for instance, the U.S. State Department spoke out in favor of the universal right to assemble and petition the government.

Chun's government bowed to this pressure saying that it would allow "study" of reforms in preparation for eventual constitutional change in 1989. Not satisfied, the NKDP persisted in calling for revision during Chun's term and was bolstered by support from various social and religious groups. In April 1986, Chun made his unexpected announcement, thereby opening the way for basic law reform in the Assembly.

Power Politics. Soon, the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) position solidified into advocacy for a parliamentary system with a strong prime minister elected by the legislature. Many of the ROK's past political dilemmas, the ruling party claimed, were brought about by excessive centralization of executive power. A prime minister could be effectively checked by the Assembly.

As the debate raged, many South Koreans and foreign observers suspected that the diametrically opposed positions had less to do with democracy than they did with power politics: NKDP leaders felt they could prevail in a one-on-one race while the DJP believed it could win enough Assembly elections either to govern or at least play a powerful role in a coalition government.

The standoff intensified throughout 1986 with neither side showing inclination toward compromise or even discussion. Hoping to mobilize the sort of "people power" that brought the anti-Marcos opposition to power in Manila, the NKDP on several occasions took to the streets with large political rallies in support of their cause. The government's response was usually to orchestrate massive displays of force, which sent a strong message that it was in control and not in danger of fleeing as Marcos did from Malacanang.

THE NEW KOREA DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S TWO-FRONT BATTLE

Chun's April 1986 concession on constitutional reform received overwhelming approval in the U.S. where it was considered offering the chance of a major step toward a consensus on political reforms. What was surprising was the NKDP's reaction. "No compromise," declared Kim Dae Jung in a Washington Post essay just days after Chun's statement, prompting a Post editorial that questioned the "all or nothing" approach of the opposition.¹

At the same time, the two Kims' tough domination of the NKDP became a public issue. Some NKDP members complained openly of the "remote control" exercised by the old guard. In private, some expressed these criticisms to U.S. officials and observers. This is especially true of younger NKDP members, who support a more flexible and gradual approach to political reform. They have attacked the impatience and ambition of the two Kims. These young Turks complain that the NKDP old guard leadership has prevented the younger generation from rising higher in the party.

THE RULING DEMOCRATIC JUSTICE PARTY

Despite the political tensions in Seoul over the last several years, the Chun administration and the DJP have recorded significant achievements. Rapid economic growth, increased diplomatic recognition of the ROK, and resumption of ROK-North Korea dialogue after a lull of more than a decade top Chun's success list.

Chun had pledged, moreover, from the outset of his term to foster Korean democratization. The keystone of this was his vow to leave the Blue House at the end of his term in 1988. Based on Korea's long experience with one-man rule and transfers of power occurring through coups, South Koreans as well as foreign observers widely dismissed this pledge. Today his promise is accepted and, to a certain extent, taken for granted. This in itself is an historic accomplishment. A smooth power transition next year would set a firm precedent that would be difficult to reverse. It would begin institutionalization of stable political succession.

Intensified Political Struggle. Another early Chun pledge was that he wanted to strengthen the political party system. In a January 1982 address, he said that, in the past, "political parties failed dismally to fulfill their inherent functions and a small number of

1. "The Korean Protests," The Washington Post, May 5, 1986, p. A18.

individuals dominated politics and political power, thus causing political decisions to be made outside the realm of the parties" and creating "a huge obstacle to the representation of the popular will."²

Today, Chun seems to be doing precisely what he bemoaned in 1982. He, rather than the official DJP party leadership, seems to make all major DJP policy and strategy decisions. At times, this has inhibited the party's ability to maneuver effectively against the opposition. Throughout the last two years of intensified political struggle, the DJP often seemed to be simply reacting to opposition moves rather than taking innovative steps to better manage and direct events.

Ironically, the DJP and NKDP leadership and decision-making characteristics are in many ways mirror images of each other. The nearly absolute domination of the two groups by a handful of party bosses has contributed to their distrusting each other's intentions and ambitions. Hard-line positions taken by one side tend to feed on those of the other.

INITIAL U.S. RESPONSE

Early last year, in the wake of Ferdinand Marcos's fall from power in the Philippines, some Americans called on the U.S. government to press the Chun Administration for rapid "democratization." What they did not understand is that the ROK is not the Philippines. South Korea is not a mismanaged nation teetering on the edge of revolution. The differences between the ROK and the Philippines, in fact, are much more numerous than the similarities. This became clear to most U.S. policymakers in forging a bipartisan consensus that constitutional reform should be worked out by Koreans free from direct U.S. intervention.

This consensus was reflected in last year's House of Representatives Concurrent Resolution 345. It surveyed the importance of U.S.-ROK relations, recognized the "remarkable strides" that recently had been made in economic development, and acknowledged the vital U.S. security interests in the ROK. While the resolution pointed out the continued restriction of civil liberties by the ROK government, it avoided endorsing any specific solution for the political standoff. It merely called for further dialogue between the opposing parties, guarantees of fair elections, protection of civil liberties, and the release of political detainees.

North Korean Human Rights Abuses. The House Resolution was a tempered, reasonable declaration, reflecting the feeling that American involvement could jeopardize a peaceful resolution by forcing each side in the ROK to harden its position in expectation of U.S. support. As if to emphasize its caution, the House adopted a companion bill cataloging North Korean human rights abuses and condemning the threat posed to Seoul by Pyongyang's offensive military posture.

This March, a Senate Subcommittee held several hearings similar to last year's House proceedings. The Senate has begun consideration of legislation concerning both North and South Korea, which embodies a consensus on U.S. policy and mirrors that symbolized by last year's House bills.

2. Meeting a New Challenge: Selected Speeches of President Chun Doo Hwan (Volume II), Korea Textbook Co., Ltd., Seoul, Korea, 1983, p. 60.

THE SITUATION TODAY

A new and surprising element emerged dramatically last Christmas Eve when NKDP President Lee Min Woo proclaimed what is known as the "Lee Formula." Without consulting either of the Kims, Lee suggested that the opposition would be willing to consider the merits of the DJP's parliamentary system plan in return for concrete "democratization steps." By this Lee meant election law reform, local autonomy, expansion of press and civil freedoms, and release of political prisoners.

The DJP responded favorably to the Lee Formula. The two Kims did not. They demanded that Lee retract his formula; he refused. For weeks, this standoff between the titular NKDP president and the two shadow leaders raged as a major political battle within the NKDP. Some opposition party members, it was clear, were willing to compromise with the government on constitutional reform, even though the Kims were not.

Intense Wrangling. Immediate U.S. reactions to Lee's ideas were generally positive. Lee's compromise would require both the government and the opposition to give up some of what they have been demanding; in return they would achieve stability and political liberalization. A New York Times editorial hailed Lee's effort and called for continued flexibility designed to "establish democracy without a mutually destructive showdown." Saying that Lee's plan "focuses properly on the substance of democratization," in contrast to simply the power structure, the Times suggested that the opposition continue to search for an acceptable "middle ground."³

This middle ground was never reached. After weeks of intensive intra-NKDP wrangling among moderates and hard-liners, which at one point erupted into a fist fight among party members at NKDP headquarters in Seoul, the main opposition party split. And in early April, the two Kims quit the NKDP and took most of their loyalists with them.

The once dominant NKDP, still led by Lee Min Woo, was reduced to about a dozen National Assembly members. The newly formed Reunification Democratic Party (RDP) controlled by the Kims holds about 70 seats. While RDP leaders boast that the creation of their party has "purified" their struggle for democracy, the real result was a dramatic weakening of the opposition's effectiveness in the political arena and the loss of respect and credibility among the people.

Not An Inch of Headway. On April 13, a few days after the split, President Chun addressed the country saying that, since "efforts to amend the constitution by consensus so ardently desired by the public have not made even an inch of headway" and that the 10 months left in his tenure was scarcely enough time to "carry out the necessary political agenda and make practical preparations for a change of government," he had decided "to put constitutional change on hold." Chun expressed confidence that public sentiment was on his side and that stability and the scheduled power transition were South Koreans' highest priorities. Pointing the finger of blame at his political opponents, he said that they "made the prospects for any constitutional reform by consensus extremely dim by involving [themselves] in severe intraparty chaos and infighting." He chastised the opposition for being "unable to resolve its own internal problems through dialogue and compromise."

In his address, Chun vowed that, he would "press ahead...with measures to broaden the basis for democratic progress." To prove this, he reiterated his intention to introduce a

3. "Take a Chance in South Korea," The New York Times, February 2, 1987, p. 30.

system of local political autonomy. Furthermore, he pledged to guarantee "fair election administration" in "a climate conducive to fair competition."

In the days since Chun's April 13 speech, his party has begun to flesh out his ideas. DJP Chairman Roh Tae Woo unveiled measures designed to liberalize ROK press regulations and to implement local autonomy.

Internal Problems. The opposition parties strongly criticized the government's decision to end the constitutional revision debate. The newly formed Reunification Democratic Party (RDP), now headed by Kim Young Sam, threatened to boycott any election under the current constitution. Kim and other opposition leaders have called for immediate reopening of the debate on constitutional revision. Yet there seems no doubt that the main opposition group's popular support has been weakened by its internal problems. RDP Chairman Kim admits that "in the short term, our image had been damaged." But, he adds, "we will soon revitalize and gain the unanimous support of the people."

While reiterating his party's intention to boycott the election, Kim told The Heritage Foundation that "real democratization steps" undertaken by the government, such as "complete press freedom" and "release of all political prisoners" might prompt the RDP to consider participation. He added, though, that he had little faith in the government's intention to take such steps.

On May 26, President Chun announced that eight of his twenty-six cabinet ministers were being replaced. Included in the shake-up were the key posts of prime minister, home affairs minister, and intelligence chief. The result was to send a strong message that Chun intends to move forward with his agenda and remain very much in control of the political events leading up to his departure from office in February 1988.

PROSPECTS FOR STABILITY

During the last four decades, the ROK has made stunning progress in economic growth, educational and social development, and international diplomacy. Domestic politics remains the one significant area of underdevelopment. In the past few years, however, South Koreans have been moving toward democracy. Despite their propensity for political brinkmanship, they seem to recognize how much they now have at stake. Even opposition leaders concede that the vast majority of South Koreans simply will not jeopardize their continually rising living standard by taking to the streets over the pace of democratization.

Nevertheless, South Korean politicians of all stripes are under increasing pressure, particularly from the nation's swelling middle class, to move toward a more responsive political system while maintaining social order. A public opinion poll recently published by the Dong-A Ilbo, an old and respected Seoul daily newspaper long regarded as fiercely independent and generally anti-government, reveals that South Koreans are tired of the partisan bickering over the constitutional power structure and are more concerned about basic civil liberties and the nation's stability. At the bottom of their list of political desires was constitutional revision; only 8 percent of the respondents cite this as a high priority. The poll found that the highest priority is expanded press freedom, followed by social stability, a peaceful transfer of power, and fair elections.

4. Interview in Seoul, April 24, 1987.

5. Dong-A Ilbo, Seoul, Korea, April 1, 1987, p. 10.

CONCLUSION

There are ample indications that South Koreans strongly favor continuous yet measured progress toward democracy. U.S. policy should take this and other ROK political realities into account. In recent years, some critics of the Chun government have called on the U.S. to intervene directly to push ROK political development. The Reagan Administration has been urged to use U.S. trade or military cooperation as leverage to influence events in Korea and even to declare U.S. support for a specific form of government for the ROK.

This the Reagan Administration wisely refused to do. Instead it has pressed for dialogue between the Chun government and the opposition, urged respect for basic human rights, and in some instances, loudly encouraged or criticized specific ROK actions. This measured approach has nudged the opposing parties along on their own speed. The U.S., correctly, has not attempted to dominate the process.

Bridging Differences. In the recent conflict among Korean politicians over constitutional revision, concern for expanded civil liberties has been largely overshadowed. Solid progress in areas such as local autonomy and press freedom would immediately benefit the Korean people. It thus would make sense for the Chun government to focus on these measures. Success here could bridge some of the differences between the government and the opposition.

The U.S. should continue the policies it has been pursuing with certain adaptations designed to conform to the changing debate. Among the modifications are:

1) **The U.S. should encourage** the ROK government and opposition leaders to search for new avenues of negotiation over political reform. It is commendable that the ROK government has announced its intent to liberalize press regulations and grant some local autonomy as soon as possible. It should be willing to follow through on these pledges and also expand its reform efforts.

2) **The U.S. should continue** to praise President Chun for his repeated pledges to step down. Washington should stress the importance of having a Korean national leader serve his appointed term, step down from office, and voluntarily retire from politics. This could herald a new political era in Korea.

3) **The U.S. should stress** its strong support for free elections, a principle that obviously is basic to true democracy. As it seems quite likely that the national election scheduled for late this year will take place under the current constitution, it is reasonable for the U.S. government to voice its strong desire that the current electoral college system be administered in a manner allowing free competition among the candidates.

If there are inequalities built into the present election system, both the government and the opposition should consider this issue a legitimate matter for negotiation and agreement prior to the fall election. An election that is viewed as rigged will undermine the legitimacy of the next government and doom the ROK to repeat past patterns of political confrontation and crisis.

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