

B. Park Chung-hee : Developmental Dictatorship and a Dark Age for Democracy

(i) From military coup to October Yushin

The Jang Myeon government, established in the socio-political space created by the April Revolution, was overthrown by military coup on May 16, 1961, after a year of drifting in confusion. The coup was led by General Park Chung-hee and marked the end of Korea's very first experiment with parliamentary democracy. For the next 18 years Park would rule the country with an iron hand, and establish himself as a seminal figure in

the shaping of modern Korea. His protracted stewardship would be brought to a premature end by his assassination at the hands of one of his closest colleagues, Kim Jae-gyu, on October 26, 1979.

The military regime that was put in place by the May coup was characterised, on the one hand, by features of a security-oriented dictatorial rule inherited from the Rhee Syng-man era and translated into a 'military dictatorship'. On the other hand, it was a regime which revised the old, negative, anti-communist objectives of the state, and combined them with a more positive imperative for 'modernization' through state-led economic development plans. In effect, this approach opened up a 'developmental era' in which a new national mobilization was possible; and which led to the defining of the regime as a 'developmental dictatorship.' It was in this period that the tension between dictatorship and democracy burgeoned, as diverse conflicts and confrontations were created by the rapid



Park Chung-hee and coup d'état leading figures watching a street parade by the Military Academy cadets supporting the military coup. (1960, ©Kim Chun-kil)

growth of a state-led capitalist economy. Political changes prior to this period were the outcomes of political conflict between the actual authoritarian rule and the ideal of liberal democracy, whereas political changes from this point began to assume a much more complex and violent nature because of new tensions created by capitalist industrialization.

Park Chung-hee tried to transform latent national energy into a positive and determined drive for economic development by means of a new state hegemony project under the general banner of 'modernization' and the more specific rallying cry 'escape from absolute poverty'. In this way he hoped to consolidate his regime's highly tenuous political legitimacy and thereby sustain its authority to govern. Park exerted maximum control over the labor sector and managed the wider Korean society in a regimental way in order to ensure minimal obstruction in the regime's path toward the achievement of its main goal of rapid economic growth. He also strove for a total mobilization of the nation towards this objective by suppressing



The opening ceremony of a National Athletic Meeting displaying Park Chung-hee's name in a card section. (1960, © Kim Chun-kil)

any divisions within the ruling power bloc, and scorning the demands for democracy emanating from the populace. This dynamic was conducted under banners such as 'modernization of the fatherland' and 'total unity'. The so-called 'miracle of the Han

River' was done by a combination of modernization from above and a significant level of popular support, one outcome of which was a sort of exchange relation between economic interest and political interest; that is, economic compensation being gained in exchange for the deferral of political freedom. The fact that the 18 years of Park's rule represented a 'golden age of imprisonment', during which Korean criminal institutions were filled with unfortunate individuals against whom the state fabricated charges involving contraventions of national security laws, has its roots in the same background of public acceptance and silence.

The climax of Park Chung-hee's dictatorial rule was the declaration of the Yushin (revitalizing reform) Constitution and the imposition of the Yushin regime in October 1972. The Yushin regime can only be described as a historical crime committed by Park and his acolytes, and was a manifestation of their greed for power. In fact, it was the third coup engineered by Park in his efforts to suffocate democracy; following the May military coup of 1961, and the Constitutional 'coup in office' of 1969 which enabled him to serve for a previously prohibited third term.

In terms of power structure, the main feature of the Yushin regime was the overt concentration of all power in the President's hands and the concomitant dismantling of all institutional arrangements that were designed to prevent such a circumstance. The process was presented to the populace as 'democracy the Korean way'. Under the provisions of the Yushin regime, South Korea was a republic in name only. In reality, the extent of the power wielded by the President alone, with virtually no conventional checks and balances in place, was comparable to that of an absolute monarch. Although the Yushin Constitution ostensibly prescribed democratic parliamentary procedures, which in normal circumstances would serve the principles of division, the mutual constraint of power, and the politics of dialogue and compromise, any attempts by the populace to express political freedoms and the rights of citizenship were instantly repressed and labelled an 'excess of politics'. The extreme concentration of power during this period resulted in a marked diminution of social integrity; a phenomenon which was clearly reflected in a dysfunctional parliament, the subjugation of the judicial system (epitomized by 'show' trials and a rigidity of sentencing²), and the severe limitation of numerous basic freedoms including those of expression, assembly, the media, and association, as well as a serious reduction of basic labor rights. Intelligence agencies routinely monitored the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens and, together with police and military security forces, carried out widespread and arbitrary arrests, torture, and kidnapping of anyone regarded as a political or social threat. Despite the blatant illegality of the majority of these repressive activities conducted by agents of the state, they were overtly used as

2 The practice of courts routinely to award the sentence demanded by the state prosecutors in the initial indictment rather than use judicial discretion.

mechanisms to justify the role of the regime in maintaining national security. In the Park Chung-hee system of governance, development goals such as the Saemaul (new village) Movement³, the 10 billion dollar export plan, the Great Leap of the 1970s, and the Great Ambition of the 1980s⁴ were symbols of hegemonic domination, while Presidential Emergency Decrees, Garrison Decrees, and the imposition of Martial Law were symbols of the state oppression that ran in parallel.

During the Park era, a state of martial law was declared on three occasions, covering 31 months in all. In addition, Garrison Decrees were imposed three times, lasting for five months altogether, and Emergency Decrees nine times, for a total of 69 months. It can only be assumed that it did not appear abnormal to Park and his followers that for almost half of the 18 years in which he was in power the Korean people were subjected to the imposition of harsh and repressive 'emergency' legislation.

Among the legislative instruments, Emergency Decree No. 9, issued on May 13, 1975, was the severest, and effectively placed the entire nation in a wartime state of alert. In order to avoid violation of any of the provisions in this decree, citizens had to conduct themselves almost like imbeciles, pretending not to hear anything of a 'sensitive' nature, or say anything that could possibly be construed as seditious or inflammatory. In the 'age of repression, terror, and death' that Park Chung-hee had created, virtually anything could be interpreted as 'sensitive', 'seditious', or 'inflammatory'.

3 The rural community development campaign initiated and led by Park Chung-hee in the 1970s. In rural areas it was aimed mainly at the modernization of rural life and economy, with programmes ranging from cultural reform to income enhancement guidance. In the cities it was more akin to a government-led mobilization, often accompanied by state indoctrination.

4 Themes of Park Chung-hee's speeches.

(ii) Movement politics and the end of Park's rule



Figures involved in the People Revolutionary Party Incident, (1975)

Throughout the Park Chung-hee era, and especially during the Yushin period (post-1972), the state's routine invocation of the threat of communism effectively blocked any popular demand for democratic participation in the political process. At the same time, the appeals for equal opportunity of 'growth' and 'national security' exercised a

similar restriction on the citizens' legitimate ambitions for the restoration of their rights. The Yushin regime functioned in a manner that extended beyond the routine infliction of violence by the state on its citizens, into a realm where the state authority infiltrated every corner of civil society to both control it, and stifle its potential. Lacking the pluralistic political representation of diverse social interests and, therefore, deficient of a self-rectifying mechanism to resolve social conflict, it assumed the characteristics of an inflexible polity. By the same token, it was a highly vulnerable system, sustainable only for as long as it could maintain a level of economic growth sufficient to meet the demands of the imagined new society of the 'affluent 1980s', and continue to suppress even the smallest internal disagreement or external instability. It was in a social, economic, and political milieu like this that extraordinary incidents could occur, such as the kidnap and attempted murder of Kim Dae-jung (1973), the mysterious death of dissident leader Jang Jun-ha (1975), the purge of the Democratic Youth and Students Alliance (1974), and the fabricated case of attempted



YH Trading Co. girl workers who have transferred their sit-in protest location to the New Democratic Party building, (1979)

re-establishment of the People's Revolutionary Party (1974) and the execution of its members. As these and other events gradually deepened the crisis of political legitimacy, the Park regime was left with only two options, both extreme: to continue the all-out drive for economic growth, or face a catastrophic end.

But the regime also faced the need to employ a 'democratic discourse' that would differentiate it from the Rhee Syng-man administration, justify the execution of the 1961 military coup and the rule of the military junta, and Park's eventual dictatorship. It was referred to as 'administrative democracy', 'national democracy' or 'Korean democracy'; whereas in fact it was a statist mobilization of the people in the name of democracy. In essence, however, it was a discourse centred upon the 'sacrifice of democracy' or the 'inevitability of dictatorship', and used 'democracy' merely as a name and a cover. Park's distortion of nationalism and democracy was not without resistance, however, for it gained critical civil responses such as the surge of demonstrations against the Korea-Japan Meeting, that included a 'funeral march of national democracy'⁵,



The martial law soldiers who have occupied downtown Busan streets by mobilizing tanks and armored cars on the proclamation of martial law. (1979)

and the June 3 Struggle⁵, of 1964, and popular demonstrations against the Constitutional amendment in 1969. Nation-wide opposition was expressed against the Korea-Japan Meeting because of the humiliating

diplomacy of the Park government; and against the Constitutional amendment of 1969 because of the regime's disregard of democratic procedures.

One oppositional action inspired others. After the Yushin reforms were declared, various social groups and sectors began to express their antagonism and resistance to the regime. Examples such as the students' opposition to military training as part of the curriculum, the movement to uphold university campus autonomy, various pro-democracy protests, and combined efforts to protect the right to livelihood, are cases in point. The more the state attempted to repress these developments, the more resolute the resistance became. As an explicit dictatorship, the Yushin regime dealt with internal contradictions in such a way as to promote a counterforce, thereby sowing the seed of its eventual collapse. Such internal

5 The most symbolic demonstration led by university students during the June 3 Struggle.

6 A series of demonstrations from March to June 1964 protesting against the first ROK-Japan treaty meeting. By signing an agreement of war reparation with Japan, the Park regime sought a diplomatic breakthrough accompanied by a substantial aid package; resources essential for continued economic growth in Korea. The regime brought the public protest to an end on 3 June 1964 by declaring a state of martial law and arresting 348 protest leaders.

tensions multiplied and, when young woman workers at the YH company Trade Union went on strike in 1979 demanding basic rights⁷, and anti-government riots broke out in the cities of Busan and Masan⁸, the ruling bloc split over how to handle the crisis. This triggered the assassination of Park Chung-hee on 26 October 1979 and, in turn, the collapse of the Yushin regime.

With respect to the democratization movement of this period, two features stand out. First, until the time of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising in May 1980 (see below) the movement had unfolded with a fundamental adherence to liberalism, and had striven towards the common goals of toppling the military dictatorship and restoring political democracy. As a consequence, it was frequently presented in terms designed for a broad and diverse appeal; for example, the ‘One Million Appeal for Constitutional Revision’ (1973) and the ‘March 1st Declaration for Democracy and National Salvation’ (1976). This characteristic is related to the leading actors in the movement, who could not be regarded as ‘social forces’ rooted in the working class, but who were, in the main, liberal-minded ‘dissident’ intellectuals and students, who usually organised themselves within universities and religious institutions. It is uncommon, and certainly unprecedented in other parts of the world, for a strong collective resistance to be formed from scattered and sporadic actions occurring mostly in universities and religious institutions.

Second, concurrently there was an active pro-democracy movement consisting of workers, farmers, and the urban poor; all of whom were striving for freedom from want and other

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7 A sit-in strike in August 1979 staged by trade union members of the YH Trading Company, a wig manufacturer. The strike was held inside the headquarters of the main opposition party. Workers demanded guarantees of basic rights after the company decided to close down the business.

8 Wide-spread protests in the cities of Pusan and Masan in October 1979 against the Park regime.



Yi So-sun sobbing in sorrow with her son's portrait at the funeral ceremony of worker Chun Tae-il. (1970)

objectives encapsulated in social and economic democracy. This element found expression in the Gwangju Housing Complex Riot⁹ in 1971, which was the largest collective action by the urban poor since liberation, and demonstrations by farmers, such as the Ham-pyong Protest for Compensation for Sweet Potatoes¹⁰ in 1976, and the farmers'

cooperatives democratization movement¹¹. The self-immolation of the young garment industry worker, Chun Tae-il, in 1970 graphically and tragically drew attention to the dire situation of thousands of young female workers in the industry, and sparked wider criticism of the government-sponsored Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). Chun Tae-il's sacrifice also galvanised workers in Seoul's sweat-shop clothing factories to action, and presaged the birth of independent, democratic trade unionism in Korea.

The stage for democratic trade unionism was set by such actions as the formation of the Chonggye Garment Union (1970), the Dong-il Textiles Union struggle to uphold its independence,

9 Riot staged by the urban poor who had been forcibly evicted from various squatter areas in Seoul by the city authority and relocated in sub-human living conditions in the Gwangju area.

10 Wide-spread protest by farmers against the government's agricultural policies in 1976, triggered by the government's failure to purchase the promised amount of sweet potatoes from the growers.

11 Most farmers' cooperatives were ineffective until voluntary farmers' groups staged this campaign in the 1980s. It began with the demand to introduce direct elections for cooperative leadership.

the worker's rights struggle at the Han-gook Textiles Company, and the activities of the YH Union (see above). Chun Tae-il's action not only signalled the start of the democratic labor movement, but also resulted in a far deeper awareness of social reality on the parts of leading figures in the pro-democracy and other progressive social movements.

His death forced liberal movement forces to reflect upon their existing minimalist democratic agendas, and incorporate more concrete issues such as the right to livelihood of workers, the urban poor, and other grassroots disadvantaged. Chun's action also became the seed for a new social alliance, between workers and students, as well as a pivotal moment after which intellectuals became engaged in the industrial sectors, and religious groups expanded into industrial mission work.

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The Second Period of Democratization

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A. Multiple Coup d'état and the May 18 Gwangju People's Struggle

The assassination of Park Chung-hee on October 26, 1979, a manifestation of the crisis of developmental dictatorship, created a power vacuum and a position of stalemate between contending forces which is often called the 'Spring in Seoul'. It was

a 'new military' faction, consisting of members of a group within the Korean army which went under the title of the 'Society of One', that took power by a series of coup d'état (the

