



The June Struggle in 1987 was a flood in a vast expanse which had shown that the people's aspirations lied in democratization. (1987, © Kim Chun-kil)

## B. Movement Politics and the Pro-democracy Struggle

While it was national division and capitalist industrialization that together conditioned the democratization movement in the 1980s on a macro level, it was the particularly repressive system of domination in Chun Doo-hwan's Fifth Republic that actually produced it and, from the perspective of the movement agency, the central motive force came from the collective memory of the Gwangju massacre in May 1980 and the deep rage it generated.

The Gwangju carnage was a critical moment for self-reflection on the parts of all those involved in the democratization movement. First and foremost it generated an awareness that the movement thus far had not developed into a force sufficient to transform either the state or the power system within it. In other words, the realization dawned that while the movement had expressed conscientious and moral criticism of oppressive political power and economic inequality, it

had lacked both the intent and a fully coherent formula for changing the social structure and creating an alternative system. Those involved then came to reflect upon the movement's lack of leadership of the calibre necessary to convert the energy and dynamics manifested in spontaneous activities at the grassroots into a system-transforming movement. The people's struggle in Gwangju was the epitome of revolutionary upheaval, and had demonstrated the potential of the Korean populace to fundamentally transform the state. What was lacking was the quality of leadership to provide a central focus for mass struggle as well as bring unity and direction to the spontaneous, dispersed, and sporadic protests of diverse groups. Such change in perception was accompanied by a spread of distrust and withdrawal of confidence in regard to the actual leaders of the democratization movement in the 1970s.

There was, naturally, a continuation of the pro-democracy movement from the first period focusing on changing the fascist, military dictatorship into a democratic polity. At the same time, however, this period also witnessed various other radical democratization movements being set in motion and pursuing a more fundamental and comprehensive transformation of the state and society. These movements emerged as a direct result of the radicalism produced by the Gwangju massacre in 1980. On the one hand, progressive, democratic, transformative movements came into being and pursued socio-economic democracy and producer-based democracy from a class perspective; while on the other, new national liberation movements emerged that stressed national reunification and independence from foreign influence. The movement in the 1980s differed from that of the first period in that it expanded its popular base, showed more militancy in its methods, and became more radical in its ideological orientation.

Similar to the previous period, the movement was led by



Citizens crying for democracy, gathered together at the Square in front of Seoul City Hall. (1987)

students and supported by intellectuals and religious groups. However, the core of the leadership was no longer composed of the liberal elements of the previous period but was now dominated by new, radical, democratic figures who led the struggle against dictatorship in an uncompromising way. The most efficiently organized force was made up of student groups who, from the outset, defined the Chun Doo-hwan regime as anti-reunification and anti-democracy. Almost all student-led demonstrations prior to 1987 echoed with the battle-cry 'Remember Gwangju'; and the memory of Gwangju also served as a backdrop to the emergence of a distinct atmosphere of overt anti-Americanism. There was no room for moderation in the minds of students integral to these movements; as far as they were concerned the Chun regime was devoid of legitimacy, and its collapse was a primary objective. As a social group effectively free from existential conditions, students formed their resistance to the status quo from their sense of debt to 'Gwangju' and their discontent at the gulf between the reality of life and their ethical ideals and standards. When a campus

autonomy measure was introduced, student movements gained a wider mass base on the campuses and challenged the stability of the Fifth Republic by carrying out large-scale mobilization, taking a determined lead in political struggles, and systematically supporting all spontaneous popular protests.

Together with the growth of the student movement, various dissident groups such as religious associations, academics, writers, and ex-journalists began to set up pro-democracy organizations. The ‘Youth Alliance for Democratization Movement’ was established in 1983, and the ‘Alliance of People’s Movements for Democracy and Reunification’ was set up in 1985 as an umbrella organization for a number of separate movements. Identifying democracy and reunification as its two main objectives, the latter organization provided a central leadership for many of the grassroots, pro-democracy and reunification movements which had emerged since the ‘appeasement period’<sup>12</sup> of 1984. From 1986, this grouping set constitutional reform for a direct presidential election as the main item on the agenda for democratization, and played a pivotal role in leading the June Democratic Struggle in 1987. This period also saw a wide expansion of educational, cultural, and print media movements focused upon democratic values.

One notable phenomenon concerning popular movements in the 1980s was that students and intellectuals began deliberately to ally with workers and other grassroots elements, and in large numbers shifted their spheres of activities to factories and farms, etc. in the name of ‘existential relocation’. Such a large number of university students abandoning their upward trajectory on the social and professional ladder in order

<sup>12</sup> This refers to the period when the regime relaxed somewhat its persecution of alleged dissidents.



A large-scale struggle by workers who have mobilized heavy machinery. (1987)

to become factory workers or agricultural laborers was a manifestation with few equivalents outside Korea.

The labor movement in the 1980s began with the establishment of the Korea Workers Welfare Council in 1984, following the degrading revisions of labor legislation and the forced dissolution of democratic trade unions by the Chun regime. In the first period, the labor movement was led by workers at their places of work, and focused more on the provision of worker's citizenship and improvements to working conditions rather than on realizing workers' class interests. From 1985 the mass-based trade union movement gained considerable momentum, and in that year staged the first solidarity strike since 1960, in the Guro industrial area of Seoul. The strike resulted in the formation of the Seoul Labor Movement Alliance; an organization that became a model of 'mass political organization'.

Serious confrontations between Korean farmers and governmental authorities began in April 1985, when farmers launched nation-wide protests against US pressure to open up

the Korean agricultural market. Meanwhile, the urban poor movement evolved predominantly in Seoul, the capital city, and focused initially on protests against the city administration's unilateral and violent drive to redevelop poor districts. Clashes between protesters and municipal authorities sometimes resulted in the deaths of local residents.

Waves of protests and resistance involving various sectors culminated in June 1987 with a nation-wide uprising against the Chun Doo-hwan regime. It was, in a sense, a 'nationalization of Gwangju', as Korean people rose up for one cause, democracy, in a broadly based movement that transcended regional, factional, and class boundaries. The mass mobilization, under the leadership of the 'National Movement

Headquarters for Attaining a Democratic Constitution', created the biggest oppositional alliance that the regime had faced, and exerted huge pressure for radical change on the military rule. The June Democratic Struggle gave voice to millions of people and constituted the first definitive step towards democratization. Although it did not result in the actual establishment of a democratic government, and despite leaving many issues unresolved, it undoubtedly heralded the advent of a new age in Korea. The incoming tide of democratization was now unstoppable.

As soon as the June 29 Declaration<sup>13</sup> was broadcast, industrial workers submitted their demands in the newly opened political space in what came to be known as the 'July-September Great Workers' Struggle'; the largest mass action in the history of the Korean labor movement. For a period of three months, more than a million workers participated in a total of 3,311 labor disputes, averaging 30 per day, and encompassing

<sup>13</sup> This was Chun Doo-hwan's response to the nation-wide protests, and included the re-establishment of direct presidential elections as its main concession.



A national workers convention for inheriting martyr Chun Tae-ifs spirit and amending evil labor acts, (1988)

every industrial sector. This resulted in revisions to labor laws and the formation of some 1,200 new trade unions, increasing markedly both the unionisation rate and the number of trade unionists. An even more important outcome of this experience was that those in the labor movement realized the importance of a central body to organize democratic trade unions, and for which solidarity among democratic trade unions would remain a primary goal.