Robert J. Myers

SOFT NOTES FROM THE BLUE HOUSE

The announcement in Seoul on November 22 that the era of "new politics" had begun may sound like a herald of more of the same, but Korean politicians and intellectuals appear to be taking the opportunity seriously. The new, technically more liberal constitution has been completed and the rewriting of the political party law is nearly finished. According to President Chun Doo Hwan, "The permission for the political resurrection is the opening for the creation of a new politics"—a watershed between the new and the old. But, he warned, "if there is a slight deviation from the proper direction, it might bring about results which are far from desirable."

Since the assassination of President Park a year ago the fundamental accomplishment of the Chun regime has been to hold South Korea together. "There were many around a year ago saying Korea would go the way of Iran," said a senior Blue House official. "That's not what happened. But it was not inevitable that the country would remain intact."

From the serenity and security of the Blue House (so designated by the blue tiles on the eaves) this statement seems incongruous. "When Park died, there were two views. The predominant right-wing view was that it was simply a traffic accident; Korea would go on as before. The opposing view was that this was an opportunity for a thorough democratic liberalization. This was the view of the Left and the university students. President Choi Kuy-hah in this situation announced a schedule for a new constitution and elections within a year. But this was not enough for the Left. So there were the riots and bloodshed last spring. But despite all that, under President Chun the original schedule for reforms and elections will be met, if not exceeded."

How was that done? "It was not simple. One has to recognize the basic urge in Korean society for more freedom. This is partly reflected in the new constitution. But absolutely fundamental was keeping intact a political balance of power during this interim period so that the country would not disintegrate."

The allusion here was obviously to the riots that resulted in the conviction of Kim Dae-jung, the opposition leader. Foreign observers view authoritarian states such as Korea as political monoliths, forgetting that even under military rule government has to depend upon the various power sectors of society—industrial, religious, intellectual, labor—if it is to function with some degree of harmony. The state survives by popular leadership if possible, by coercion if necessary.

Will the prospect for the creation of new political parties stop the student demonstrations that have played such a dramatic role in South Korean politics? "Possibly. The students are unique. There is a tradition that runs back to the agitation against the Japanese for independence. It was the role of the intellectual to strive for freedom. Today, the students on the main campuses have a kind of authority recognized by the institutions. If they were to demonstrate that today they also have responsibilities to go with their privileges."

Next year the number of college students is to be almost doubled. Why does the government do this, considering the still unresolved problem of student agitation? "The country needs more and better-qualified college graduates. As you know, Park took pride in keeping income levels in balance, between the countryside and urban areas in particular. The greatest difference in income is between someone who is a high school graduate and a college graduate. Increasing the number of students in Seoul National University next year from twenty thousand to thirty will be a step in that direction."

But suppose the number of jobs is insufficient? "That is not much of a gamble. Our economy must expand or the whole country is in serious trouble. Growth is under way again, up 30 per cent this September over last. And inflation, now 30 per cent, is staring down."

The modernization process, defined as the replacement of human energy by other energy sources, has nowhere gone more quickly and relentlessly than in Korea. This has caused social and moral tension. "We have been negligent in developing the spiritual aspects in Korea because we have been preoccupied with the development of our economy," said President Chun. "The harmonization of traditional culture with modern culture is a very important task, which we should tackle independently. The nation's own traditional culture has lost its unique shape due to the thirty-six years of Japanese colonial rule before national liberation and the subsequent rapid inflow of foreign civilization."

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In international affairs Seoul has been sending emissaries abroad to maintain and expand their international position. They court the Indians and Beijing, the latter with no success. (In Beijing earlier this month I asked a newly retired general his view of a militarily strong South Korea with U.S. ground forces to forestall the hegemonists. He laughed. "We are for reunification." A mission had just returned from Mongolia to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the intervention of Chinese "volunteers" against the United States, Korea, and U.N. allies.) Some prospective Reagan advisors have already been contacted, and official Korea-U.S. relations will undoubtedly improve with the anticipated upsurge of defense expenditures and downplaying of human rights issues.

But even then, the love/hate relationship characteristic
of Korea-American relations will continue. In this Confucian social setting, the Korean citizen has responsibilities and few rights. The pluralism Koreans see in their society is not so obvious to us. Therein lies the root of different value systems that need discussion and enlightenment if Korea-U.S. relations are to be put on a solid, long-term foundation of mutual respect.

Robert J. Myers, President of CRIA, has just returned from the Far East.

EXCURSUS 2

T. Chadek on
HAITI: THE BOAT-PEOPLE'S RETURN

Port-au-Prince, November 17

There was no overlooking the oil painting that made its appearance last Tuesday in the small resort hotel just up the hill from Port-au-Prince. For one thing it was huge, and for another it was standing on the floor of the small lobby, at least against a chair. But even more arresting was its subject matter. In a style both sleek and primitive, it crowded to the far rafters with slaves, most of them black, sentry's rifle and booted feet.

Above the hold was open. One saw on the deck, silhouetted against a Caribbean blue sky, a squatting sailor and a secretary's rifle and booted feet. Two likewise light-skinned men stood self-importantly at the left, and at the right a black man raised his chained hands imploringly to the heavens. The hatch above the hold was open. One saw on the deck, silhouetted against a Caribbean blue sky, a squatting sailor and a secretary's rifle and booted feet.

The American visitor exclaimed over the painting. It was, she remarked to the desk clerk in beginner's creole, "It was its subject matter. In a style both sleek and primitive, it crowded to the far rafters with slaves, most of them black, sentry's rifle and booted feet. Above the hold was open. One saw on the deck, silhouetted against a Caribbean blue sky, a squatting sailor and a secretary's rifle and booted feet.

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