

On his visit Carter publicly raised the question of human rights. But fundamental economic and social changes may turn out to be more important than protest

Movement Toward Democracy in South Korea

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For better or worse United States foreign policy is now identified with human rights, setting moral standards for other nations. Human rights guidelines have become a screen filtering Washington's relations with virtually all countries. Among the most controversial of these is South Korea, where we are accused on the one hand of condoning human rights violations in order to protect our regional security interests and on the other of undercutting our security interests by pressing human rights policies that weaken South Korea.

Human rights problems in South Korea long preceded the Carter administration. However, the administration's global focus on human rights opened the way for Korean and foreign critics of President Park Chung-hee. They were waiting to attack U.S.-ROK ties, armed with damaging evidence of human rights violations.

Throughout the twentieth century antigovernment Koreans and overseas lobbyists of various political persuasions have struggled vainly to promote democracy in Korea. Koreans who suffered under harsh Japanese colonial rule for forty years repeatedly tried to present their case before international bodies but were seldom successful. The emergence of the Syngman Rhee (Yi Sung-man) government in the postwar period gave Korea's democratic forces reason to hope. Surely, under American tutelage, Rhee—who had been a leading Christian lobbyist in the United States for Korean freedom—would build a democratic republic in the half of Korea linked to the free world. That was not to be. In the nearly three decades of the ROK's existence its citizens have lived with a skeletal democracy at best.

The Rhee regime and its short-lived successors that preceded the Park takeover in 1961 made more of a democratic pretense than Park, but neither they nor the increasingly centralized and autocratic Park government permitted more than a formal framework for democratic institutions. All of the regimes displayed prominently their constitutions and legally elected assemblies. However, except for a very brief period in the interregnum between Rhee and Park, these were only the trappings of democracy. That brief period, when something approaching authentic democracy was tried in Seoul,

was, sadly, marked by chaotic political factionalism and indecision. The evident "failure" of democracy in its foreshortened Korean test gave added impetus to Park's military coup and his later repressive policies.

Park's sometimes harsh measures greatly upset a broad range of South Korean political and civic figures, who resolutely believed Western-style democracy—and the values that support it—could flourish in Korea if given a real chance. Many of these people felt let down by the United States when Washington—from Presidents Kennedy to Ford—clutched Park, warts and all, to its breast.

The rationale for American acceptance of Park is not difficult to discern. It was—and is—in the national interest of the United States to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula. Whatever his faults, Park certainly has done that. Moreover, with a little help from his friends in Japan and the United States, Park surprised everyone by leading his people out of economic stagnation. South Korea under Park has defied all predictions and blossomed as a viable economic power. South Korea has joined Japan and Taiwan as the economic heart of Asia. Though American interests in Korea remain in large part keyed to Japan, South Korea is gradually developing an intrinsic value of its own to the U.S.

At the same time as South Korea carved out a more secure niche for itself in the world, Park's obvious economic success posed a problem for his political detractors at home and abroad. His opponents at home were doubly constrained by Park's success. The first constraint was straightforward—as South Korea became stronger Park seemed to be confirmed in the wisdom of his ways. From Park's viewpoint, if a little discipline stabilized his fractious country and attracted foreign trade and investment, why not speed up progress by tightening the political screws at home? Egged on by fears of a weakened American commitment to Korea in the post-Vietnam era, Park took an ever firmer grip on the reins of state through the 1972 *Yushin* ("Reform") Constitution and various "emergency measures" that severely restricted political and human rights. Confounding his domestic critics who berated Park for forsaking even a facade of democratic ideals, South Korea accommodated itself to Park's authoritarianism and continued to prosper.

A difficulty in attacking Park's excesses is that the South Korean masses genuinely support Park and have

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for some time. It is true that initially Park lacked widespread popular support. At home and abroad he was seen as a usurper and an American puppet. However, as his methods bore fruit in terms of economic prosperity, his domestic acclaim grew. Moreover, his success gradually enabled Park to shed his puppet image. Even the intellectual élite (students, faculty, journalists, and clergy) and wealthier class, who traditionally backed dissidence and who most acutely sense the loss of political power, somewhat grudgingly gave him their support. Little by little many of that social stratum gained a personal stake in South Korea's technocratic future. Neither they nor the working class seems to feel very aggrieved by the "loss" of political rights that they had never enjoyed. They know what they are missing, of course, since they can see democracy at work elsewhere. However, they appear content to forsake certain human rights, at least temporarily.

Thus it is a fairly small minority of South Korean dissidents who publicly protest that human rights are violated by Park and his secret police. But since that minority includes some prominent and sincere advocates of democracy—notably including former presidential candidate Kim Dae-jung, who was kidnapped by the KCIA from Japan and imprisoned for two-and-a-half years before his release in a December, 1978, amnesty—it is not surprising these activists gain a hearing from American and other foreign critics of Park.

In many respects Park's domestic critics seem to have given up hope, temporarily, of turning the tide against Park at home. Their protests are received with some sympathy at home, but with an equal amount of impatience. The prevailing popular attitude toward the dissidents seems to be one of counseling patience. The masses would rather get on with the tasks at hand—building a stronger nation and improving their own standards of living.

Increasingly, the young people of South Korea appear willing to accept this argument and pour their energies into economic endeavors. Ironically, given the strong Christian commitment of many prominent Korean dissidents, an overpowering Protestant work ethic has imbued contemporary South Korean society with a hard-driving preoccupation with economic affairs that is undercutting social activism. No longer are Korea's intellectuals and upper class dominated by a Confucian view of work. The old image of a lettered *Yangban* class that disdains physical work is now outmoded. South Korea's contemporary dissidents suffer by being tarnished with that image. They seem increasingly out of touch with South Korea's new technocratic élite—the scientists, engineers, and businessmen who are responsible for economic achievement.

As political dissidents are rebuffed by this élite and left behind by material progress at home, their foreign audience becomes more important. The foreign audience compensates for dwindling domestic interest in immediate political change. More important, by focusing on the Carter administration, foreign allies of South Korean dissidents have been successful in bringing substantial pressure on Park to institute systemic reforms and to moderate his dictatorial excesses.

But South Korean dissidents have to be cautious in their appeals for foreign support. The central problem for the dissidents is that many of their overseas allies are grossly ill informed, to the point of naiveté, about the realities of present-day Korea. In their gullibility they tend to accept exaggerated rhetoric as gospel. Too often they view the South Korean masses as hoodwinked by Park and simply out of step with the more enlightened dissident minority.

Support of foreign friends, though vital, poses risks for South Korea's dissidents. They are in danger of being stamped with a foreign imprint. These foreign friends are not viewed very favorably by South Korea's masses. They may be thought of as well meaning, but they are also considered abrasive, condescending, and selfish. They are simultaneously abrasive and condescending by "interfering" in South Korean affairs, telling Park and other Korean leaders how they should deal with domestic politics. Though many South Koreans agree with the advice from abroad and welcome improvements the advice produces, an overriding popular sentiment objects to any foreigner telling them what is best for them. Economic successes have spurred a growing nationalism in support of such feelings. Many South Koreans see the dissidents and their foreign allies as a selfish and privileged élite who dare to tell others to scuttle their long-delayed hope to put poverty behind them. What do the dissidents offer in exchange? Freedom and democracy, of course. But most South Koreans see no guarantee of these forbidden fruits blossoming under any viable alternative to Park. In short, the alliance of dissidents and foreign supporters seems to offer the South Korean people very little of concrete value to replace what they might lose as a result of political upheaval.

Making matters worse for domestic dissidents is the tendency of many foreign critics of Park's rule to play down the problems in North Korea. To any objective observer, repression in South Korea pales in comparison with North Korea's lack of respect for even the most fundamental human rights. By not decrying conditions in the North—usually on the basis that outsiders have more influence over the South—foreign critics of South Korea's government appear to be condoning North Korea's outrages. Most critics of Park deny that this is their intent, but the impression remains.

The current status of human rights in South Korea and the chances for rapid improvement appear bleak. Despite the almost strident optimism of South Korea's dissident community, it is likely they share this dour view in their hearts. At present it is amply warranted.

The Park government shows no signs of weakness. However, constrained mainly by American diplomatic pressure, Park certainly will tread carefully for some time. He cannot afford to bring down the wrath of Washington or Tokyo by unnecessarily antagonizing American or Japanese human rights activists. Neither can Park permit domestic political disruption to become too visible just when reunification with North Korea is again on the horizon—albeit very far off. Instead of cracking down on dissent after the event, it appears that preemptive measures will be the order of the day for

handling protest. Judging from the government's effective use of house arrest to defuse this year's March 1 planned protests, among others, it is a very powerful tactic. For the government, nipping protest in the bud has the double advantage of low visibility and minimal need for physical violence or arrest. Though the annual cycle of spring, school openings, and revolutionary holidays will bring a new crop of protest each year for years to come, the prospects for any success are very poor. As long as the government sees public protest as a threat to its existence—and events in Iran did nothing to dissuade the Park forces—dissidents are not likely to bring about significant change.

And yet the future of Korean democracy is not entirely bleak. While the human rights dissidents are failing in their overt attempt to restructure South Korea, the country is in fact being altered massively before our eyes. The economic transformation of South Korea is changing the country in ways President Park never imagined. Until recently, Park's support was drawn largely from the ROK military forces. In something approaching an inverse proportion, economic growth today is gradually negating the military as a prop for the Park regime. To be sure, the threat from North Korea will assure the military a substantial voice in national affairs indefinitely. However, every day the voice of South Korea's economic élite grows more important.

To date that voice has been limited almost entirely to commercial and financial affairs. In the economic realm it is now virtually decisive. Park and his government cannot move in these areas without first obtaining the tacit approval of South Korea's powerful economic czars. However, this élite is dependent, in a reciprocal manner, on the government. As a result, and because it is so new at the game, South Korea's economic leaders are still reluctant to express political views even in private. This situation cannot last long. Already there are indications that South Korea's economic élite is evolving into a corps of behind-the-scenes political power brokers very similar to that operating in Japan, where all political activity is financed and manipulated by big business.

The importance of this development for South Korean democracy is that it promises to occur at the same time as a generational change within the society. The time is fast approaching when the South Korean masses will no longer be willing to accept with equanimity the government's denial of their political and social rights in exchange for stability and material comfort. The public now is almost fully accustomed to prosperity. As a new generation reaches adulthood, and as the Park government's authoritarian leaders age, the interests of the two groups are very likely to diverge. The younger generation, those who have not experienced widespread poverty, will not so readily tolerate denial of the political rights they know are the norm in advanced societies.

Democratic evolution in South Korea is not likely to produce, at least not very soon, the sort of freewheeling parliamentary democracy that some of South Korea's idealistic dissidents advocate. The chief beneficiaries of

the emergent trend will probably be the corporate political power brokers and their friends. Superimposed on South Korea's heavily factionalized and vertically structured society, such a system promises to give a broad spectrum of South Koreans an indirect but real say in their nation's political affairs. A combination of behind-the-scenes power brokers drawn from the ranks of the private sector economic élite and of government bureaucrats involved in economic affairs will then have the chance to develop more meaningful parliamentary institutions. Regardless of the pace of the struggle for legislative and electoral reforms, the key new factor will be the greatly increased political strength of the assorted technocrats who are the true creators of South Korea's contemporary prosperity.

If this analysis is correct, there may be less reason for anxiety about the long-term prospects for political and human rights in South Korea. Any political gains middle-class technocrats and corporate leaders make in coming years clearly will be at the expense of President Park and his political cronies. Equally important, it will be at the expense of Park's backers in the armed forces, who even now are experiencing an uncomfortable economic and cultural lag as South Korean society gradually becomes less focused on military affairs. Obviously, the transition of power I have projected may not come about peacefully.

If political change is rushed, the odds are against a smooth transition. If the dissidents active today have their way and a power shift were effected abruptly, the likelihood of disorder seems certain to stimulate an adverse reaction from many sectors. President Park and his legions clearly would fight such a move tooth and nail. Fear of losing their access to the new leadership would likely provoke South Korea's military leaders to intervene in the political process. Even more troubling for the long run, the political potential of South Korea's new economic élite would be stymied indefinitely, regardless of whether the dissident or the Park forces emerged victorious.

On the other hand, by allowing political change to take place gradually, the old guard in all sectors of South Korean society will either die off or be co-opted by the emergent national interests expressed in the middle class and business sectors. Though this means accepting the heavy-handed Park government for longer than South Korea's political dissidents and their foreign sympathizers want, it may be the most hopeful course. Supporters of South Korean democracy would be wise to permit rapid economic evolution to produce inevitable societal change. Such peaceful transition will be slower, but it is more certain to produce the desired results. This is not to suggest that South Korean dissidents should simply fold their tents and give up the good fight. On the contrary, they will have to maintain public pressure to help shape the directions of evolutionary change. Without their guidance, democratic forces might well lose sight of the goal. That would be a tragedy indeed, for—if they play their cards right—South Koreans now have before them a long-term prospect never before enjoyed by Koreans: a prosperous economy directed by a stable government responsive to their needs and aspirations.