

The new military élite considers itself honest and egalitarian, but it may soon find itself in a political-economic minefield

Korea: What the Generals Want

BY EDWARD A. OLSEN

Observers of Korea have recently received a surfeit of facts about the military takeover, riots, civil insurgency in Cholla province, widespread arrests, and abuse of prisoners. What we lack is a firm sense of what all these events mean for South Korea and the United States. Though it is still early, sufficient evidence exists to warrant a preliminary judgment about the new leadership of post-Park Korea and what may be ahead for the Republic of Korea.

The South Korean military was a mainstay of Park's base of support. However, by October, 1979, increased economic prosperity forced the armed forces to share access to political power with an economic, bureaucratic, and technocratic élite that is the core of Korea's contemporary well-being. Prosperity, coupled with inflation, also put a crimp in the ability of the military to maintain a life-style appropriate to their social status, causing considerable unhappiness. While there is no evidence such grievances played any role in Park's death and the subsequent imposition of martial law, it is not surprising that some military figures became reluctant to sacrifice their suddenly restored prominence by yielding power to civilians via constitutional means.

Despite the enticements and the readily available opportunities, particularly in the midst of the October assassination and the December 12-13 internal military coup, the military did not make a major move. It is true they made their presence known by way of martial law and as a strong behind-the-scenes influence. Still, these actions were minimal compared to what they might have done.

The main factor inhibiting the military from an overt seizure of power was South Korea's vastly improved material circumstances. Unlike the nation Park seized in 1962, today's Korea has a sophisticated economy upon which the people base virtually all their hopes for a better future. Without Park Chung Hee's personal political clout to keep South Korea's house in order, the economy is likely to become the primary thread that binds the nation together.

The importance of the economy to South Korean security and stability is intrinsic but it is also relative.

With Park gone, there is little possibility of anyone assuming his whole mantle. Park's power was developed over an eighteen-year period and does not appear transferable. To compensate for the partial vacuum left by Park's death the new leaders of South Korea will be compelled to seek and depend on a wider base of popular support. Much of that new support will, in turn, be dependent on the nation's economic well-being. It is highly unlikely that relatively ill-prepared military leaders can manage effectively a sophisticated economy. Iron-fisted military rule with little popular support, perhaps compounded by economic mismanagement, would seriously jeopardize South Korea's long-range prospects.

In the past, fear of Park and respect for the principle of civil-military separation tended to discourage overt political activity by the South Korean military. Thus for a long time it has been difficult to determine the real political views of important officers. Despite that difficulty, the American media have popularized a misperception of the South Korean military as highly politicized, hard-line anti-Communists inexorably bent on repressing domestic dissidents. That the military is strongly anti-Communist there can be no doubt; however, the other facets of the popular image are more complex.

THE "NEW PARK"?

There is no doubt that much of the older generation of officers is corruptly politicized. This is far less true of younger officers. Junior and middle-level officers were favorably influenced by American precepts of civil-military relations. One complaint commonly heard among officers from major general and below is that the upper ranks are clogged with corrupt officers who used political connections to attain their rank. Younger officers tend to see this as an anachronism and an embarrassment, a view clearly held by the new crop of officers who have emerged on top.

The key to what is now occurring in South Korea lies in the person of Lieutenant General Chon Too Hwan, his ideas and motives. Until Park Chung Hee was assassinated General Chon was virtually unknown outside the upper reaches of the military hierarchy. In a matter of months Chon emerged on top of the heap. How did that happen? More important, does Chon deserve the infamous label "the new Park"?

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The first serious attention paid to Chon was as a result of his leadership role in the December, 1979, intramilitary coup that led to the ouster of the then martial law administrator, General Chung Seung Hwa. Chon and several other young generals accused Chung of complicity in President Park's murder. All evidence suggests the accusation is unfounded. The intramilitary coup was carried out for purely political-ideological reasons.

A superficial impression of the December shake-up widely disseminated by the media was a dichotomy between military moderates and hard-liners. General Chung was often portrayed as a moderate; General Chon and his most visible ally, General Lee Hi Song, were portrayed as hard-lining disciples of Park Chung Hee. This impression was misleading.

Chung was far from a moderate; he was as tough as Park, perhaps tougher. Furthermore, once installed as the martial law administrator, Chung moved quickly to put his own friends in positions of power. This move appears to have been a direct cause of the feeling of Chon and other young generals that their days might well be numbered. The image Chon and Lee earned as Park loyalists is undoubtedly well deserved, but this does not mean they are diehard right wingers bent on personal gain. If Chung fit that category, how do Chon, Lee, and the handful of other young generals differ?

Chon's background is still somewhat hazy, but the key elements are known. Chon is a native of Kyongsang province—as was Park, President Syngman Rhee, and many other South Korean leaders—including three other generals prominent in the new military élite. The dominance of Kyongsang province natives in national government and economic affairs was a major factor stirring rebellion in neighboring Cholla province, a long-time jealous rival, this spring. Chon is the highest ranking officer in the post-Korean War cadre of Korean Military Academy graduates, class of 1955. His was the first class to receive a full four-year KMA education. As such, these graduates feel they have superior training compared to their elders. Coupled with their elders' dominance of the senior ranks and billets, this induced a severe generational conflict within the South Korean armed forces in Park's last years. The younger men saw themselves as honest, relatively egalitarian, and competent professionals who were being held back by political hacks. Despite his more advanced age and different educational background (KMA '49), General Lee's reputation for competence and honesty brought him close to the military's "young turks."

Chon and many of his fellow officers were greatly impressed with the egalitarian spirit that Park cited as the core of the *Yushin* movement. To the young men, Park's policies and the material success they brought the nation were a new form of Korean nationalism. They despised corruption and opportunism at any level and admired Park's admonition that Koreans must foster self-reliance and pride. Park's economic success and ability to stand up to Washington's pressures for domestic reform struck a responsive chord in many, for at times they tended to equate Korean nationalism with subdued anti-Americanism. Chon's personal admiration for Park and ideological commitment to the *Yushin*

spirit brought him to the attention of Cha Ji Chul, Park's bodyguard/advisor, who brought him on board at the Blue House as a senior staff officer under Cha.

It was Chon's ties to the Park-Cha clique that led to his first general's star in 1978 and second star in 1979, when Chon was given command of the Defense Security Command. In that position Chon was to uphold the ideological purity of the *Yushin* spirit within the military and, to a lesser extent, among civilians. Neither was Chon averse to using his post-December influence to gain his third star in March, 1980. A fourth seems likely in short order, legitimizing Chon's stature as the foremost military figure in South Korea today.

On the surface this would seem to make Chon as politicized as his elders—including General Chung. In one sense this is quite true, but Chon's politics differ considerably. For Chon the *Yushin* system's idealization of a spiritual renaissance seems to have been far more than mere rhetoric. He may be one of the few people in



South Korea to take seriously the norms established in the *Saemaum* (New Spirit) movement headed by President Park's eldest daughter, Keun Hae. Against this background Chon seems to have viewed the moves by Park's presumed successors as gross opportunism. Even more horrific was the possibility that one of Park's old rivals might eventually succeed to the presidency by dismantling the *Yushin* system.

Clearly, the intramilitary realignment was a "coup" of sorts. However, a major question remained: What would be the impact on civilian rule? Nowhere were concerns greater than in the United States. In Washington and Seoul, Americans denounced the generals'

usurpation of authority as a dangerous precedent. Immense pressures were exerted on American officials to do something to rectify the situation. Prudence quickly overcame pique, however, and Americans on both sides of the Pacific settled back to await developments, hoping to see positive signs from South Korea's new military leaders.

The first indication of where Seoul might be headed came little more than a day after the December 12 military upheaval. Though domestic and foreign skeptics quickly latched onto the inclusion of two generals in the sensitive Home and Defense ministries and a notoriously hard-line ex-prosecutor in the Justice Ministry as positive proof of military domination of the Choi government, the first cabinet also included two relatively liberal members—at Health and Education. Because the new cabinet obviously had been sanctioned by the new military élite, there was a distinct sense of relief that the military would remain behind the scenes.

Further strengthening this interpretation was the first public statement issued by South Korea's new military élite. Lee Hi Song, who replaced General Chung as martial law chief on December 18, announced that the military would not get involved in politics and then listed six areas in which he sought public cooperation. These focused on fighting communism at home and as exported by North Korea, maintaining public order by avoiding all extremism in thought and action, and rejecting what he called "funkeyism which sacrifices the pride and dignity of the nation."

These developments raised more doubts about skeptics' questions. This did not look like the "hawk" faction testing its new talons. On the contrary, the military was pledging to uphold the Choi government and its promises to institute democratic reforms. Despite outward appearances, however, it soon became apparent that something was afoot. Looking back at the competition between the rival military cliques, it is clear that the key distinction was between corrupt hard-liners and puritanical hard-liners.

THE GUNS OF MAY

South Korea's badly shaken system was further traumatized in May, 1980, when Chon and his fellow upstarts—pushing their way past far more senior military and political leaders—seized absolute behind-the-scenes control of the government under the guise of expanded martial law. In addition to Chon and Lee, the new élite is headed by General Ro Tae Woo (Seoul garrison commander), General Chung Ho Yong (Special Forces commander), and General Kim Bok Dong (Third Army commander).

As long as these five remained discreetly behind the scenes, there was little reason to be unduly concerned. They appeared to be intimidated by the enormity of running a complex socio-economic system and by the reluctance of South Korea's conservative élite to sanction another Park-style military takeover. The great fear in Seoul (and in Washington too) was that civil unrest would give Chon or some other general an excuse to make an open power grab. Despite the comparative calm prevailing among South Korea's normally

obstreperous political and dissident communities, escalating labor and student unrest provided a rationale—albeit flimsy—for a military takeover. It was flimsy because the unrest was not particularly acute. Under Chon's aegis the military jailed a wide spectrum of politicians—from reform-minded Kim Dae Jung on the left to Park's presumed heir apparent Kim Jong Pil on the right—banned the National Assembly from meeting so that the legislators could not revoke martial law, abolished all civil rights, closed the universities, arrested campus leaders, and—most ominous—established a military-dominated national advisory council for the president.

Now that General Chon and his followers have severely tightened their grip on the Seoul government, the question to be answered is: Is another Park setting himself up to assume total dictatorial power?

Unfortunately, some variant of a neo-Park dictatorship seems almost certain. Western-style democratic forces and Park's more moderate descendants (i.e., Kim Jong Pil and the mainstream ruling party) are not likely to succeed in the face of a military-led authoritarian government strongly imbued with Confucian principles as enunciated by Park.

The traditional mores of Confucianism left an indelible stamp of authoritarianism on Korean political culture and society as a whole. Historically and today, liberty in Korea—when perceived at all—was and is conceived of as a part of some larger virtue such as wisdom or propriety. Freedom connoted a certain sense of licentiousness, a release from socially important constraints. It was not a positive concept, since it suggested rebellion from the commonweal. The egalitarian spirit that forms much of the theoretical basis of Western democracy was too individualistic to be truly compatible with Korea's Confucian norms. In short, the traditional Korean notions of personal and group liberty are quite different from the West's notions.

As long as South Korea's new military élite abstains from total military control and retains at least a figure-head civilian at the helm of government, they can be given the benefit of the doubt. Until Chon or any other general declares himself South Korea's "new Park," the military's actions should be interpreted by foreign friends of South Korean democracy as an attempt to impose Confucian order on burgeoning chaos for the sake of national stability. The fact that this interpretation is incorrect is irrelevant, for it may encourage Chon et al. to follow such a relatively preferable option or, failing that, it may give South Korea's conservative mainstream the necessary leverage to compel the military ideologues to temper their notions. In either case such an approach would provide a safe way out of a dangerous situation for a group of military officers who are rapidly entering a realm that seems beyond their competence. Instead of cornering Chon and his fellow officers, we should give them ample opportunity to back out of a political-economic minefield with minimal loss of face. **WW**