

May 18 Democratic Uprising in Gwangju

Introduction

The Gwangju Uprising was a ten-day protest against martial laws starting on May 18, 1980 and ending on May 27 with the ROK army's brutal suppression. This was proof of the Korean people's desperate desire for democracy. Although Korea had a democratic government after the Korean War, the citizens faced martial laws, and military coups in the following decades.

After the resignation of President Rhee Syngman in 1960, the liberal party collapsed and the opposing Democratic Party took over. For the first time, the Democratic Party organized the government, with Chang Myon as prime minister, and guided the nation into the Second Republic. The Second Republic was South Korea's first democratic regime and a new National Assembly was elected on July 29, 1960. The National Assembly became a forum for diverse views, unlike before. In addition, the press was uncensored, and the schemes for building the economy came about.

As the society became more open, independent thinkers began to call for a new approach towards reunification with North Korea. This alarmed Seoul's ruling groups, as it was an apparent move towards the left. Meanwhile, on August 15, 1960, Kim Il Sung, the President of North Korea, proposed a system of unification with a committee made up of representatives from both North and South Korea.¹ In response, students marched on the streets and planned to meet their counterparts from North Korea at Panmunjom.² Students also joined the National Students Federation for National Unification, and organized the Seoul National University's politics department.³ This frightened the right wing and security forces in South Korea. Although the political atmosphere improved in the early part of 1961, democracy in Korea caused economic stagnation, dependency on the United States, political instability, and a drift to the left.⁴ This gave the military pretext for action.

Korea under Park Chung Hee (1961-1979)

Park Chung Hee was born on November 14, 1917, into a peasant family in the North Kyongsang Province. Park studied at a military academy in Japan and later served as a soldier in the Japanese military. He was involved in tracking down the Korean guerrillas who were against the Japanese and later received special recognition from Emperor Hirohito. He also joined the Yosu-Sunchon rebellion and was arrested for being a communist. After his military coup in 1961, his Yosu-Sunchon background was revealed and caused a momentary worry for the Americans that he might be a communist.

Shortly after midnight on May 16, 1969, Park Chung Hee and a few army and marine officers strategically positioned armored units in Seoul, and quickly secured the city, the national radio and press, and shortly afterwards, the government.⁵ They did this without blood, with 3,500 men and about a dozen colonels out of an army of 600,000. Soon afterwards, the rogue colonels spread word that the U.S. had supported the coup, but there was no evidence proving the claim. By May 17, thirty colonels and junior generals had closed the National Assembly and banned all political activity.⁶ The brains behind the coup was Kim Chong Pil, Park's nephew by marriage. He later founded the KCIA on June 13, 1961 with the help of the U.S. CIA and set up the Democratic Republican Party. In America, the Kennedy administration was delighted with Park's plans for developing the economy in Korea.

The prime minister, Chang Myon, heard of the coup at 2 am and fled to Seoul's Catholic archdiocese to hide. At 3:30 am, General Chang To Yang asked General Magruder to organize American

troops to stop the coup. However, Magruder refused, saying that the U.S. still supported a legally constituted government. The next morning, Chang Myon called the embassy in Korea and demanded that Magruder “take charge.”⁷ When Magruder went to meet President Yun Po Son, the president was unsympathetic and said that “Korea needed a strong government” and Chung was not the leader Korea needed. After collecting some information, Magruder determined that the coup was not “communist inspired,” Chang didn’t have much support, and “all the powerful men in and around the Seoul government appear to have had knowledge of the plan for the coup and at least have not opposed it.”⁸

After the coup, Park ruled Korea under the emergency junta called the Supreme Council of National Reconstruction, trying to “purify” Korea.⁹ He proclaimed “extraordinary law measure” by June 1961, suspending most of Chang Myon’s 1960 constitutions and arresting in 2,000 politicians, 13,300 civil servants and military officers¹⁰. Another “political purification law” banned 4,367 politicians from political activities for the next six years.¹¹ Forty-six out of sixty-four newspapers were closed and about 14,000 people were arrested under the category of “hooligans.”¹²

Between 1961-1963, the Kennedy administration consistently pressured Park to return to civilian rule. In 1963, after a power struggle between Park and Kim Chong Pil, Kim left Korea for an extended trip and Park lifted political restrictions on 2,300 former politicians so that they could participate in elections. When it seemed that Park would lose the 1963 election, he threatened to declare martial law and continue the junta for four more years. In response, Ambassador Sam Berger threatened open American opposition to Park. Berger succeeded in keeping the elections on schedule.

In the spring of 1964, large student demonstrations appeared amidst threats to abolish the National Assembly and re-introduction of martial law. In June 1964, Park re-introduced martial law. While protests calmed down in August 1964, as a new school term began, dissent increased again in April 1965 and continued until August. This time, martial law was not invoked.

Park was reelected in 1967 in a reasonably fair election. During 1971-1972, Park let the KCIA loose and declared himself president for life. In 1972, Park had scribes write a new constitution “removing all limits on his tenure in office and giving him powers to appoint and dismiss the cabinet and even the prime minister, to designate one-third of the National Assembly, to suspend or destroy civil liberties, and to issue decrees for whatever powers the Yushin framers forgot to include.”¹³ This was a proclamation of Park’s Yushin regime. Yushin is the Korean pronunciation of the Japanese word *issin*, used by Meiji leaders in 1868. Park justified this change by referring to rapid international changes.

During the Yushin era, Park gave the KCIA a lot of power. The KCIA could use their power at will to reward friends and punish enemies. Tear gas was used so often that reporters came to call Korea the “tear gas nation”.¹⁴ During the protests over normalization of relationships with Japan in the spring of 1965, dissidents accused the United States of supplying the Korean government with tear gas. The KCIA also used “unbudgeted funds” for political purposes.¹⁵ They funded the political activities and anything else Park and Kim Chong Pil wanted to support. They also conducted investigations, made arrest, spread terror, brought back censorship, and planted spies both at home and abroad. The KCIA was free to arrest and torture those suspected to be communist. Agents were everywhere: newspaper offices, broadcasting stations, company unions, and college classrooms in both America and Korea.¹⁶ Korean citizens thought the best way to counter the KCIA surveillance was to not talk to anyone, not even their family members.

In 1972, Park was almost beaten by Kim Dae Jung, who outpolled him by 46 percent of the votes despite voting frauds. Kim Dae Jung was from South Cholla and was no aristocrat but could work a crown better than any other politician. He took legitimate grievances of the shunned Cholla population and became their complete advocate and leader. After Park’s almost defeat, there were no more elections

but the government took special interest in Kim. Under the orders of Park, Kim was run over by a truck in 1971, kidnapped in 1973, put under house arrest until 1979 and nearly executed in 1980.

Another influential factor during Park's regime was the Labor Movement. Labor conditions in Korea in the 1940s were terrible, with low wages, mistreatment and bad ventilation. Young girls were forced to kneel and work for an average of 15 hours and sometimes take stimulants to stay and work during the night. Repression of the working class grew during the 1970s and moved strongly to affect politics in 1979-80. In 1970, a textile worker, Chon Tae Il set himself on fire and shouted "Obey the labor standards act" and "Don't mistreat young girls".¹⁷ This suicide shocked the whole nation. In 1979, the Korean economy ran into difficulties: sharp increases in oil prices, idle assembly lines in heavy industries, enormous debt, and rising labor costs among skilled workers. During this crisis, in early August 1979, the YH incident happened.

YH was a wig trading company, and ranked fifteenth in export earning in 1970. In the late 1970s, they lost their hold on wigs and the women employees started doing simple needlework. On August 7, the company was abruptly shut down, employees were dismissed, and dormitories and mess halls. In protest, young female textile workers at the YH Trading Company were holding a sit-down strike. The police forced 170 women out and beat them. When the women escaped to the New Democratic Party headquarters, a force of about one thousand policemen stormed the building, injuring many people and killing one woman worker. The controlled media claimed that the Urban Industrial Mission had communist connections. However, the Carter administration denounced the government's actions, saying it was "brutal and excessive".¹⁸ Afterwards, the Park regime started to collapse. This caused massive urban protests mainly in Busan and Masan.

On October 26, 1979, Park went to a nearby KCIA safe house to have dinner with the director of the KCIA and his close friend, Kim Jae Gyu. The president's secretary, Kim Gye Won, was also in the house, accompanying the president. In the middle of an argument, Kim pulled out a pistol, and shot the president in the chest and head, who died on the spot. KCIA security forces also killed three of Park's bodyguards.¹⁹ Kim fled the scene and General Kim Seong Hwa took him to a military base known as bunker B-2, promising protection. There, Chung called the president's secretary and confirmed that Kim Jae Gyu killed the president and arrested him there. Afterwards, commotion broke out among the power elite in the security services and extended into the night until General Chung Seong Hwa took control.²⁰ On October 27, at 2am, Choi Gyu Ha, the prime minister, became president in accordance with Article 48 of the Yushin Constitution, and at 4:10am, the whole nation, with the exception of Jeju island, was put under emergency martial laws.²¹ After Park's death, the Carter administration did little to support democracy in Korea.

Chun Doo Hwan's Rise To Power

Despite first-hand witnesses, an investigation of the president was carried out as specifics were still unknown. The investigation was led by Major General Chun Doo Hwan, chief of Defense Security Command and a longtime loyalist to Park Chung Hee. During the investigation, Chun Doo Hwan also controlled the information brought in. He had people report two times a day, once at 8am, once at 5pm, and strictly kept the information confidential.²² On December 12, 1979, General Chun and General Roh Tae Woo used the Army's Ninth Division, Seoul's capital garrison and various special forces, to execute a coup within the military.²³ Chun, Roh and thirty-six other officers arrested Chung Seong Hwa, his rival, and about forty high-ranking officers.²⁴

Meanwhile, the KCIA spread rumors of an imminent North Korean invasion to maintain the martial laws but this was disproven since officials of North Korea and South Korea were planning to meet. This caused protests at Seoul, Busan and Gwangju against the martial laws, which were led by labor activists, students and opposition leaders calling for democratic elections. After the death of Park, the people hoped for a democracy. Gwangju, the provincial capital of South Jeolla, was the center of the pro-democracy movement.

In April 1980, Chun Doo Hwan persuaded President Choi Gyu Ha to name him chief of the KCIA. The American commander of the United States–South Korea Combined Forces Command (CFC) approved the deployment of the troops to Gwangju. The CFC is a binational defense team where four-star generals from both countries have operational control over more than 600,000 military personnel of all services.²⁵ Under the approval of the United States, Chun's government sent paratroopers from elite military forces to Gwangju to suppress the protests. Before they were deployed, the soldiers were subjected to brutal training.²⁶ Starting from March, soldiers were beaten and starved, growing the mindset of hating the protesters. Chun Doo Hwan sent soldiers to Seoul and Busan as well but they were just normal soldiers. To justify his actions, Chun Doo Hwan spread the story of hidden North Korean spies causing havoc in Gwangju, and soldiers that were deployed were trying to stop it. He also spread the news that Kim Dae Jung, his political opponent, was culpable.²⁷ This would shine a good light on the military and spread fear to other cities and citizens. People would want a strong military leader in charge to protect them, further strengthening Chun Doo Hwan's power. Soldiers were sent to Gwangju early on and heard that protesters would gather if the government did something unagreeable.

By March 1980, almost all universities saw demonstrations from the students calling for the lifting of martial law, the release of arrested dissidents and the resignation of Chun Doo Hwan. On March 15, 300,000 citizens joined 100,000 students in protest of martial law. The protesters could students could protest on the streets easily, while police begged them to behave and protest peacefully. There were soldiers already stationed at the city borders, ready to invade and arrest the protesters.

During a protest in Gwangju, a police car caught on fire and one civilian died. The fire and the protest was heavily broadcasted, making people think that the protesters were at fault. After a democratic rally at Seoul sparked democratic aspirations in Gwangju, the students of Chonnam and Chosun University demonstrated on the streets. Students who were divided by which university they attended, broke police lines and seized the Province Hall Square. They rallied for democratic laws and the lifting of martial laws. There was also an overnight sit-in at Choson University. The student-led demonstrations in Gwangju were well-planned and orderly, unlike other cities. The Chonnam University student union agreed to gather by the main gate at 10:00 a.m. if a shutdown was imposed.²⁸

After March 15, student leadership in Seoul wanted to wait and look for new political changes. On May 16, the 18th anniversary of Park Chung Hee's coup, student leadership in Cholla organized torch marches. On the evening of the 16th, people saw military vehicles going to Gwangju. By afternoon of March 17, 1,000 paratroopers were in Gwangju waiting for the command of the CFC.

The Gwangju Uprising

On March 17, at 11:40 pm, total martial law was expanded to include Jeju island, and state security agents and special airborne forces took over factories and universities in Gwangju under the official statement of "with the suspicious movements of the North Korean military and the nationwide unrest considered we have declared a state of emergency".²⁹ Later, Kim Dae Jung and other opposing

politicians were falsely arrested under false charges of engineering workers and students' protests. 26 politicians from the same ruling party were arrested as well.

Within two hours, the military occupied Chonnam and Choson National Universities. The troops raided the building, kicking and beating the students who had stayed there after the march on the 16th, and later detaining them at the University Center. In Seoul and Gwangju, undercover agents arrested key activists, professors and leading members of dissident student organizations, destroying the unified leadership behind rallies and paralyzing organizations.

On May 18, around 200 students gathered at Chonnam National University to protest against the government forces and the seizing of the Universities. In order for more people to gather, the military ordered the police to not react against the protest, raising hopes of democracy among protesters. Around 10 am, paratroopers and students clashed. In the afternoon, the protest was moved downtown, towards the Geumnamno area. The police initially handled the protest until paratroopers took over at around 4pm. The soldiers started beating the protesters, as well as innocent bystanders. From the first day, 2 people died from the paratroopers' brutal beatings. The first known death was a 29-year-old deaf man named Kim Gyeong Cheol, who was a bystander. In addition, one female student was pilloried near the town square, where a paratrooper attacked her breasts with his bayonet, and other students had their faces burned by flamethrowers.³⁰ The paratroopers wore masks as part of their uniform. This de-identification allowed the ferocity among the soldiers to grow since their identity remained hidden.³¹ Fueled by paratroopers' brutal and indiscriminate killing and maiming, citizens joined the protesting students, turning the protests city wide. By May 20, 100,000 citizens out of 730,000 gathered at the city hall to protest. Most protesters joined due to the increase in violence and families were getting hurt; they went out to protect each other rather than protest.³²

On the 20th, the military started firing against citizens with real bullets, causing an unknown number of casualties near the Gwangju station. Angered protesters burned down the MBC broadcasting station for misreporting the situation in Gwangju. In the evening, hundreds of taxis, buses, large trucks and cars, called the drivers of democracy, drove towards the Provincial Office, to support the citizens and the demonstration. The drivers came to support the citizens and the demonstration because of the brutality of the paratroopers earlier in the day. Additionally, many drivers were angered as paratroopers would drag out and beat taxi drivers who were trying to get the injured to the hospital. As the drivers tried to use their vehicles to block the soldiers or as weapons, paratroopers used tear gas, pulled drivers out of their cars and assaulted them. When protesters tried to get through soldier lines with their vehicles, soldiers opened fire, causing about 100 casualties and 55-58 deaths.³³

On the 21st, two people were found dead. One died due to gunshot wounds and another was beaten to death.³⁴ The violence also climaxed. Around 1pm, the troops opened fire at a group of protesters gathered in front of the Jeonnam Provincial Office. The citizens raided police stations and armed themselves with bats, knives, pipes, hammers, Molotov cocktails, M1 rifles and carbines. Later that afternoon, gunfights between the paratroopers and the civilian militia broke out in front of the Jeonnam Provincial Office. By 5:30pm, the militia had acquired two light machine guns and used them against the troops, who began to retreat from the downtown area. Soon, the troops had retreated and the citizens of Gwangju declared the city free of military rule.

For the next five days, the citizens governed themselves autonomously and in peace. They counted 500 people dead and about 960 missing.³⁵ The city councils appealed to the U.S embassy to intervene, but the Americans could only turn a cold shoulder. For the U.S. to take the citizen's side against Chun would have been an intervention with no precedent since the 1940s.³⁶ A 1988 National Assembly

report claimed that the paratroopers had waited outside the city for three days, waiting for the U.S aircraft carrier *Midway* and other American naval ships to arrive in Korean waters.³⁷ Citizens were warned that the Twentieth Division of the ROK Army would enter the city at dawn on May 27, and that everyone was to disarm. After hearing about the impending invasion, the citizens created the Struggle Committee of Gwangju Citizens. 150 people stayed behind in the provincial building and were killed on March 27, when soldiers entered the city at 3am, and shot those who had refused to disarm. Unlike before, the soldiers were disciplined units and quickly secured the city. Special airborne and 20,000 martial law troops reoccupied the city, with a massive array of equipment and weapons, including eighteen tanks and helicopters. They cut off telephone lines within the city, as well as between the city and the rest of the province. Gwangju was completely isolated when the troops began their carnage. The U.S. President Ronald Reagan approved the course of action taken by Chun Doo Hwan.³⁸

During the ten-day uprising, it is said that more than 200 were killed, hundreds went missing, and thousands were injured.³⁹ However, the death count may never be known as many bodies were taken to unknown, isolated areas and burned by the soldiers.

Events After the Gwangju Uprising

Right after the uprising, Chun Doo Hwan completed his coup and shut down political activity and arrested Kim Dae Jung, blaming him for the rebellion.⁴⁰ After a show trial, Kim was set to be executed but pressure from America In January 1981, Chun dissolved the Chonggye Garment Workers' Union, destroying the union that had begun with Chon Tae Il's suicide. He also purged the political activities of 800 politicians and 8000 officials in government and business. President Ronald Reagan invited Chun to the White House and sold him 36 F-16 jet fighters and added about 4000 Americans to the existing troop commitments.⁴¹ The President's aides told reporters that the U.S. wanted to support Seoul in case North Korea decided to take advantage of the situation.⁴²

Back in Korea, new military leaders were swift and ruthless in getting rid of the “undesirable elements” such as gang members, drug dealers and smugglers.⁴³ They were sent to “reeducation” military camps.⁴⁴ These “reeducation” camps were boot camps where prisoners were beaten and mistreated.⁴⁵ 5,603 civil servants, 3,274 teachers and journalists were purged; 811 politicians were banned from political activities; more than 60,000 individuals were convicted of violating “public peace and order”.⁴⁶ 39,742 spent one month to years at a military camp in the Gangwon province, doing hard labor and were subjected to physical abuse in subhuman conditions. During these times, many innocent victims were picked as each police station had a quota to fill.⁴⁷ Student activists, labor activists, participants in the Gwangju activists, doctors, professors and high school students were taken. In 1988, the Ministry of Defense stated that 50 people died during the ‘reeducation’ and 397 people died due to the aftereffects and in 2003, the National Assembly passed a law to clear the names of the victims and offer compensation.⁴⁸

During the 1980s, people still continued to protest against Chun. However, the government continued to violently suppress these protests. In 1987, Chun peacefully stepped down from his position as president to show his “determination to personally establish a precedent of a peaceful transition of power.”⁴⁹ Roh Tae Woo became the next president. This transfer of power was partially due to the increase in protests around the nation, but also the upcoming 1988 Olympic Games held in Seoul. Chun knew that he could not continue to violently suppress the demonstration while the whole world was

watching Korea during the Olympics. In the mid 1990s, Chun and Roh were put under trial and sentenced to jail for their involvement with the December coup and the Gwangju Uprising.

Conclusion

In the beginning and even years later, the Gwangju Uprising had and continues to have a great impact on Korea and other countries. Every year, on May 18, citizens of Korea hold a commemoration. In the past years, new facts have been unearthed, and new testimonies have appeared. While Korean citizens had limited knowledge on the truth of the uprising, photographs and videos from Gwangju circulated Germany, Japan and the U.S. The transnational pathway the photographs traveled is a testament to the Korean pro-democracy movement.⁵⁰ Another example of Gwangju's influence is by song. In 1982, a group of musicians and writers gathered to perform "March for the Beloved", a song created in honor of two activists who had died during the Gwangju Uprising.⁵¹ Over the decades, this song has emerged as a central piece in Korean's repertoire of resistance. This song resurfaced in March 2017, when people were protesting for Park Geun Hye's impeachment. Outside of Korea, this song became a call to action in various parts of Asia, including Hong Kong, China, Japan, Malaysia, and Thailand.⁵²

Endnotes

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