KOREA'S TIPPING POINT TO DEMOCRACY: A CORRESPONDENT'S VIEW OF THE EIGHTIES*

WILLIAM HORSLEY

Somewhat in contrast to the presentations we heard earlier today, I will present my memories and assessments of South Korea in the Eighties mostly in terms of how the country's development fitted into the global trend of evolution in the latter part of the twentieth century. It was an era which saw countries in many parts of the world move towards democratic government, and away from authoritarian regimes of both the left and right which ruled by force – indeed many were in the habit of repressing, killing and torturing their own people to stay in power.

Most of us think of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and the dramatic collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, as an almost miraculous moment when totalitarianism lost and the democratic idea won a great victory. In fact, the decade of the Eighties saw a series of challenges to totalitarian or military-backed governments, notably those against Soviet communist domination in Poland, Hungary and other countries of Eastern Europe. And for me, living in East Asia and reporting on the region from my base in Japan, I saw a groundswell of popular demands for more representative government, and popular opposition to a number of autocratic regimes in the region, building throughout the decade. And my contention is that South Korea has a special and positive place in what was a global trend towards constitutionality and the rule of law and democracy, which often went hand in hand with more prosperity.

I first visited South Korea as a BBC reporter on a short visit in the mid-1970s. Then, between 1983 and 1990, I was a BBC correspondent based in Tokyo but also covering events in East Asia as a whole during a turbulent decade up and down the region. The Eighties also saw the overthrow of the military-backed regime of President Marcos in the Philippines, and it ended with attempts at something like 'people power' revolts in both Burma and China, although both of those were bloodily suppressed.

It seems to me that in that context South Korea occupies an unusual – even a

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unique – place. On each visit I made there I was struck by the dynamism of the conscientious social and political movements which rebelled against the authoritarian rule of successive military-backed governments. Earlier, back in the 1960s, a mass student-led protest had already led to the expulsion of South Korea's then military strongman, Syngman Rhee. The same set of forces endured and kept up a vigorous struggle year after year, for workers' rights and for free elections and against military rule under the regimes led in turn by President Park Chung Hee, and then Chun Doo Hwan and finally Roh Tae Woo. And I think few would now dispute that the final tipping-point to democratic rule came in the years 1987 to '88, during the years before and immediately after the1988 Seoul Olympics.

Park was, as we have heard, shot and killed by his own intelligence chief in a kind of palace coup in 1979, and was then succeeded by other military strongmen. But remarkably, South Koreans eventually experienced something that was not seen in any of the other countries of East Asia which were dominated in that period by authoritarian right-wing regimes – that is, they saw both the generals who followed Park Chung Hee, namely Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, charged, convicted and dressed in prison clothes, serving prison sentences for their autocratic rule and the abuses which they ordered to maintain their power.

And to me one figure above all embodied these movements towards a more open civic society and what he himself called 'participatory democracy': Kim Dae Jung. He was a candidate in presidential elections several times from the 1970s onwards – and each time he and his supporters claimed that he only lost the vote as a result of election fraud managed by the ruling elite and the army. But finally, some time after the army's domination of South Korean politics came to an end, he was elected president, and served for a single five-year term from 1998. And today South Korea has evolved into a remarkably vibrant and open society, and the most wired nation in East Asia (if not the world) in terms of Internet use and the vigour and energy of its blogosphere.

The vitality of the pro-democratic forces in South Korea during the long Cold War years seemed to me all the more remarkable because the country was right on one of the most dangerous Cold War borders. The American army was there in force as a 'tripwire' – to make clear to the North Korean communist regime that if the North should attack or invade again, the full force of America's military might, including nuclear weapons, stood ready to strike back with devastating consequences. On one trip to the DMZ I recall an American army officer remarking casually that Korea was one of the three 'flashpoints' which the US had identified for the possible start of the Third World War. The DMZ was indeed a scary place, the scene of the gruesome axe murders in 1976 of two American officers who rashly decided to cut down a tree that was blocking the view, and many other incidents.

In Seoul, everyone experienced the regular air raid warnings and civil defence

drills, designed to school the population in what they should do during the 15 minutes after North Korea had scrambled its attack jets and before they would be expected to drop their bombs on Seoul. The 1980s were punctuated by tragedies that grew out of the great powers' Cold War confrontation and the unpredictability of the North Korean regime under Kim Il Sung: there was the shooting down in 1983 of a South Korean airliner which flew into Soviet airspace over Sakhalin; the Rangoon bombing, later the same year, that killed several members of the South Korean cabinet; and in 1987 the planting by North Korean agents of a bomb on another Korean Airlines passenger plane which was blown up over the Andaman Sea. That constant tension and the threat of military attack were of course cited by the military as a powerful reason why South Korea needed an iron-strong government; and Kim Dae Jung especially was painted as a dangerous leftist radical, with his ideas of civilian control of the military, and labour rights, and participatory democracy.

I consider that Korea was exceptional in Asia because the Korean people actually liberated themselves from autocratic rule and built their own democracy. I also covered the 'people power' uprising in the Philippines which drove out President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. It was a very impressive turnout of millions of ordinary Filipinos, who won an important victory when the Marcoses were airlifted off the roof of the Malacanang Palace with their bars of gold to a safe haven in Hawai'i. But that revolt failed to break the stranglehold of the country's oligarchs, a handful of hugely wealthy families, or to usher in an era of lively democracy or control of corruption. As for Japan, by the 1980s it was already established as a stable democracy and America's primary ally in the region. But the Japanese people never rose up and demanded democracy themselves; it was something grafted onto the society after the country's unconditional surrender at the end of the Pacific war. And Japan evolved a very peculiar form of democratic government in the second half of the twentieth century, one based for almost all that time on one-party rule, and a high degree of social conformity. Boisterous public debate and meaningful transfers of power between competing political groups with genuinely different agendas remains a rather alien idea in Japan.

So why? Why did the South Koreans exhibit this plucky and determined will to oppose authoritarian rule and demand a more responsible form of politics? Part of the answer, I suppose, lies in the mind-set of struggle against colonial oppression, and of sacrifice, which the Koreans had developed during the long period of Japanese occupation up to 1945. It struck me forcefully, too, that a substantial part of the South Korean population were and are Christians – either Protestants or Catholics (Kim Dae Jung was in fact a Catholic). However you look at it, I was struck by the way in which many Koreans seemed to be motivated by the idea of individual conscience – both in terms of the struggle for workers' rights and their aptitude for personal participation in political movements, rallies and elections.

I am sure that another very powerful motivation was also at work – a fervent national desire to catch up with and even to overtake Japan in every way possible – economically, of course, but also in terms of social and political development.

I saw the very early stage of South Korea's 'economic miracle' already in 1976, on my very first reporting trip there. I vividly recall going by road down to Ulsan, near Pusan, and being astonished at the sight of the vast shipyard there, which was still being built but was designed to be one of the largest shipbuilding sites in the world – as indeed it became quite soon after that. And I was impressed by the resourcefulness of people, too. I was driven down to Ulsan by a driver in a very basic and rather clapped-out little Hyundai car, which broke down on the road. The fan belt had broken so the car wouldn't move. But very quickly the driver had improvised a temporary fan belt, with a piece of string, or a pair of women's stockings, and we were back on the road.

On that trip I first met Kim Dae Jung, at his house – he liked to invite foreign reporters there and talk to them over a cup of ginseng tea. He had been in jail as a dissident for some time already, and I photographed him in front of a calendar, on which he had marked all the months when he was incarcerated with a red cross. He told me then the extraordinary story of how in 1973 he had been kidnapped by Korean CIA agents in the Grand Palace hotel in Tokyo. He had been drugged, and bound hand and foot, and taken on a small boat out into Tokyo Bay and out to sea. His captors, he said, put heavy stones round his legs, planning to throw him into the sea to drown, but at the crucial moment an American helicopter had appeared and 'buzzed' the boat, in a clear warning to the KCIA not to do it. So his life was saved.

He also spoke of how he had suffered what he said was another assassination attempt, at about the time when he had stood against Park Chung Hee as a candidate in the 1971 presidential election. A car had driven into him in the street and injured him badly. He walked with a limp for the rest of his life as a result. He believed that the election had been rigged. The published result of the vote had been remarkably close – with only a few percentage points between him and Park. He claimed that the regime had simply counted all the votes of the army – at least about a million men – for Park Chung Hee; without that, he argued, he would already have been elected president and made South Korea a democracy.

Instead he was to spend the next seventeen years either in jail, or under house arrest, or in exile.

During that meeting Kim Dae Jung used a memorable phrase about himself – he said that he had survived those hardships, and close shaves with death, thanks to what he called his 'strong thread of life'. Altogether he made a big impression on me, as a man of conscience as well as a brilliant politician and public speaker. I remember speaking about him to a senior British diplomat at some point later, and suggesting that Kim Dae Jung could be seen as the Nelson Mandela of Korea. I'm afraid the

diplomat blenched at that idea; Kim Dae Jung was regarded by conservative forces, including some in the British government, as a dangerous radical.

I must say many years later I felt my judgement had been vindicated, when Kim Dae Jung became South Korea's president and was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

It's important to remember that through most of those years of military-backed rule, South Korea was in effect a police state. Foreign reporters had to assume their phones were bugged. I always assumed that the reason why visiting correspondents, who usually came over from Japan, were put in rooms on the same couple of floors of the main hotels, was to make sure the authorities could listen in. And from time to time officials would summon one of them for a sharp interrogation and dressing-down for what they had written. For example, one American journalist was summoned and harangued in the late Seventies for describing South Korea at that time as 'a tinderbox' in a BBC radio interview. Political opponents and dissidents were constantly harassed, and there were many political prisoners.

The paranoia of the regime in those days had its amusing side. I remember one incident when I went back to Seoul at the end of the Seventies to make a BBC radio documentary with John Tusa. The government press office helpfully arranged a number of interviews with officials and other public figures for us, but we had made separate arrangements on a certain day to go to the headquarters of one of the opposition parties to interview its leader, Kim Young Sam. So we made our excuses from our official minder and said thanks, but we would not need the services of an official driver; and we headed off by taxi to the party headquarters. When we got there, sure enough our government minder was sitting on the steps waiting for us – just to make sure that his masters knew everything they could about what we were doing during our stay in Seoul.

In 1980 the most serious popular uprising against the military regime took place, in protest against the martial law that was imposed under a new military strongman, Chun Doo Hwan. The uprising in the southwestern city of Kwangju – Kim Dae Jung's political stronghold – was ruthlessly suppressed, with the deaths of some 200 people. It came to be known as the Kwangju massacre.

The government, true to form, blamed Kim Dae Jung for stirring up the rebellion; he was charged with sedition and sentenced to death. He spent some weeks on death row but again his life was saved – this time after interventions by, among others, the much-respected American Ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer, and by a plea for clemency from Pope John-Paul the Second.

The Seoul Olympics, as I've said, proved to be the catalyst for the final toppling of the military-backed regime. Already in 1987 the protests against the Chun Doo Hwan government were becoming fierce; it was commonplace to have raging battles on the campuses of the main universities in Seoul, which quite often spilled out into

the streets. The road to the airport ran just past Yonsei, one of the biggest and most radical universities, and quite often when one passed by there would be tear gas in the street and the sounds of battle coming out of there.

From the mid-1980s onwards, as the BBC correspondent in the region, I found myself constantly jumping on a plane from Tokyo to cover mass protests and crises in Korea. On one occasion an all-day battle raged around the big hotels in the centre of the city, with hundreds of students throwing stones at police and the police firing tear gas at them. The streets were choked with the noxious fumes, which later caused me quite serious throat and ear problems for a year or two. As a reporter I often had to wear a gas mask in order to witness what was going on, and I was told by my foreign editor that I was the first correspondent who had sent over a voice report from the streets recorded with my gas mask on! It was really hard to make out what I was saying, I admit, but it was authentic.

The street battles were quite ritualised but they raged at that time for several weeks. I was told by an ITV crew about an embarrassing thing that happened to them. They had retreated from the battlefield to take a break through a side entrance of one of the big hotels, only to find themselves in the middle of a line of guests greeting the bride and groom at a Korean wedding reception. The reporter and his camera crew were covered in white powder from the tear gas, which made the people inside sneeze and clutch their handkerchiefs. The TV team had to beat a hasty retreat.

For me a highlight of that period was a particular day, in June 1987, when the ruling party, the Democratic Justice Party, the DJP, decided that with the Olympics coming up the next year they had to do something drastic to defuse the protests. It was a hectic time and I like other journalists was reporting from Seoul almost round the clock. But early one morning I woke up and remembered that on that day the DJP candidate for the next presidential election, General Roh Tae Woo, who was in effect Chun Doo Hwan's second-in command, was due to make an important speech in response to the weeks of continuous street protests. So I called up a South Korean government press officer I knew, who was on the spot at the party headquarters. He told me the speech was about to be given and that he had the text in front of him. "Anything special in it?" I asked. He told me that Roh Tae Woo would announce that he was going to "Save the Nation" by introducing sweeping political reforms, including the freeing of all political prisoners. "Does that include Kim Dae Jung?" I asked. "I assume so", I was told. That was enough. And so I was the first to report to the world that South Korea, one year before the Seoul Olympics, had embraced the idea of a genuinely open democracy.

In reality the ruling elite were not ready to give up control so easily. The government did win some time, though, and it still had many ways to manipulate public opinion, which it used to the full. Once again Kim Dae Jung stood in the presidential election that was held the next year; once again there were allegations of electoral fraud; and

in the end Roh Tae Woo was declared the winner by a narrow margin. The result was largely thanks to the disunity of three opposition candidates, including Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, who all insisted on standing, so splitting the opposition vote three ways.

Even so, a turning-point had been reached. From then on South Korea started to develop friendly ties with China. Kim Young Sam became the first truly civilian president. Roh Tae Woo and Chun were both jailed and disgraced. And Kim Dae Jung became South Korea's president for five years from 1998 and won the Nobel Prize, for his 'Sunshine policy' towards North Korea and his lifelong contribution to human rights in East Asia. Kim Dae Jung's own record was in the end tarnished to some extent by the proven corruption of his sons, and the revelation that a lot of money had secretly been paid to persuade Kim Il Sung's son, Kim Jong Il, to take part in the first ever inter-Korean summit in 2000 inside North Korea.

But Kim Dae Jung's personal courage and his extraordinary dedication to the cause of democracy and human rights make a remarkable story. It's also the clearest symbol of South Korea's unique experience in East Asia, of building a functioning democracy through the nation's own efforts – and so serving as an important example to others, too.