1979 – DAYS OF RAGE AND PRESIDENT PARK'S ASSASSINATION*

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In this short presentation, I will try to outline what it was like to cover South Korea's October 1979 riots and the aftermath of the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in the same month. Also, for reasons that will become evident, I will talk about the problems and pitfalls sometimes experienced by foreign correspondents while covering major stories such as Park's death.

Among major international news agencies such as Reuters, Associated Press and Agence France Press, competition has always been fierce. This competition has increased in recent years with the sophistication of computers. We used to say in Reuters, even back in the 1970s when computers were in their infancy, that every second was a deadline. My South Korean experience was certainly a test in this regard.

Unlike other speakers today, I am not a Korea expert. But I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time. At the time, I was Reuters news editor in Japan and was asked to help the South Korea bureau following rioting in the south of the country. A major Reuters Tokyo brief at the time was to keep a weather eye on the Korean peninsula. But this changed after the dramatic events of 1979–80, with Reuters beefing up its office in Seoul. Before launching into my main topic, I will give you a brief idea of how Reuters operated in South Korea in those days and the problems we faced.

Our office was in the Hapdong news agency building in Seoul. The bureau was staffed by two South Korean journalists together with an interpreter and a driver. The bureau chief was Lee Siho, a highly respected correspondent with excellent English. Unfortunately, he died from liver cancer in 1980. His number two was the very able Oh Ilson, who, by 1979, had got to grips with the way Reuters worked. Working life for our staffers, as with most other news outlets, could be extremely difficult.

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The office driver, nicknamed 'Uncle Cho', was famous in Reuters for carrying a correspondent under his arm to flee fighting among spectators at a major boxing match. At the same time, he managed to fight off rioters with the other arm. Cho was known as 'Uncle' for glaring dangerously at any Reuter person who looked for too long – or too often – at his pretty niece. Thus, the 'Uncle' title.

The office translator was Moon Ilwan, who later helped Reuters to cover the 1980 rebellion in Kwangju. Soon after the army took control of the city, he was forced into the centre of a circle of soldiers with fixed bayonets and beaten with a helmet wielded by an officer. Several hundred civilians were killed in the Kwangju uprising, now seen by many people as a pivotal moment in South Korea's struggle for democracy.

Finally, there was the daily noon-time sonic boom heard in Seoul as a US recce plane flew just south of the DMZ to note any changes in the disposition of North Korean troops on the other side.

The bureau had reasonable access to South Korean officials, and others in any kind of authority in those days. But this access has improved vastly since then. Indeed, the sizes of the Reuters bureaux in both Japan and South Korea have increased enormously, especially since the 1980s. In Japan by the mid-1990s, the staff figure had risen to around 450 from 17 in 1979, while the South Korean operation had nearly 50 people. These figures included not only journalists, many of them economic folk, but also computer experts, television camera crews, photographers, lawyers and accountants.

In the 1970s there was a body of opinion that believed South Korea constantly overstated the threat it faced from North Korea in an effort to keep the US Army in situ between Seoul and the Imjin. In a Reuters interview during my time in the region an official, known as the 'Korean Kissinger', said off-the-record that if the North ever attacked the South, the South would be "On the Yalu in 10 days". This was taken as tacit recognition of the relative economic and military strengths of the two countries and the generally poorly trained and equipped soldiers of the North. It was a policy that apparently worked. Jimmy Carter had vowed during his presidential campaign to pull US forces out of Korea. But after his election, the Pentagon produced a study saying the disposition of North Korean forces had changed dramatically. This allowed Carter to back out of his campaign pledge.

In the 1970s, South Korea, as all of you know, was a vastly different place to what it is today. The 1960s and 1970s were the years of Park Chung Hee. In 1961, then an army major-general, he emerged as South Korea's leader following a military coup. By the time of his assassination in 1979, he had ruled South Korea for 18 years with dictatorial powers and harsh martial laws.

Also in 1961, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency – the KCIA – was formed. It coordinated international and domestic intelligence activities and was also used to suppress mainly domestic opposition to Park's regime. Among foreign

correspondents working in South Korea – at least in the 1970s – it was believed that the KCIA regularly monitored room telephones at the Chosun Hotel, Seoul's premier haunt for foreign journalists. This also applied to the Lotte Hotel. Some people also suspected that the KCIA had control rooms in both hotels. But, as with others things in South Korea at the time, it was difficult to know the difference between legend and reality. One noticeable quirk was the immobile 'blinds' in room windows, especially in hotels that overlooked the presidential Blue House. The blinds purposely made it impossible to see the building.

Returning briefly to Park's rule, he nearly lost the 1971 presidential election to Kim Dae Jung. You will also remember that in 1972, Park established the Yushin Constitution which, among other things, abolished direct voting for presidential elections and replaced it with an indirect voting system involving delegates of the National Assembly. Any act of opposition or denial of the constitution, disliked intensely by opposition parties and groups, was punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

My first full day in South Korea was 23 October 1979, when Oh Ilson and I were driven some 200 kilometres by Uncle Cho to the southern city of Pusan. Pusan, the country's second largest city, and the nearby industrial city of Masan, recently had been the scene of the worst anti-government violence since Park came to power in 1961. For a newcomer, the journey south was fascinating. Of particular interest were the mountains and hills, often with little or no foliage – a result of napalm bombing by the United States in the Korean War.

We eventually reached Pusan, South Korea's second largest city and the home city of Kim Young Sam, the newly-elected New Democratic Party leader. He had taken a policy of never compromising or cooperating with Park until the repeal of the Yushin Constitution. In an earlier newspaper interview, he also appealed to the United States to end support for Park. Kim had been elected NDP chairman in May 1979, despite intense KCIA efforts to persuade the party to back 'a more acceptable candidate'.

In August 1979, around 2,000 policemen stormed NDP headquarters. After this much-criticised incident, Park was determined to remove Kim from the political scene and instructed the KCIA to engineer such a move. In September, a court ordered the suspension of Kim's chairmanship of the NDP. This was followed by Park's Democratic Republican Party expelling Kim from the National Assembly in a secret session. This move led all 66 NDP lawmakers to submit their resignations to the National Assembly in protest. At the same time, Jimmy Carter's administration in the U.S. recalled its Seoul-based ambassador.

On 16 October, uprisings broke out in Pusan, followed by arson attacks on police stations. It was the largest demonstration since the days of President Syngman Rhee. On 19 October, rioting spread to Masan, with students and other citizens seeking

repeal of the Yushin Constitution. At this stage, the KCIA said the demonstrations were not being carried out solely by college students but were part of a popular uprising, joined by regular citizens, to resist the regime. The KCIA apparently warned President Park that the uprisings probably could spread to other large cities, including Seoul. Park was reported to have said that he himself would give an order to fire on demonstrators if the situation worsened.

It was clear when we arrived in Pusan on 23 October that the government had moved with a heavy hand against the protesters. The city and surrounding areas had been clamped under emergency martial law. But during the evening of 23 October, Pusan's martial law commander, Lieutenant-General Park Chunggung, announced that the overnight curfew would be reduced from six hours to four, in line with the rest of South Korea. Under internal security regulations, in force throughout Korea since the end of the Korean War, a midnight-to-dawn curfew had been imposed throughout the country.

In both Pusan and Masan during my visit, there were no immediate figures for the dead and injured. In Pusan, tanks and armoured personnel carriers were still stationed outside the city hall, while regular troops were positioned behind sandbags outside railway stations and newspaper and television offices. At the same time, vehicles carrying paratroopers, with American M-16 rifles and fixed bayonets, were reported to be moving towards the city. This most certainly did not give the impression of a return – even gradual – to normality. The same was true for Masan.

Oh Ilson and I headed back to Seoul on 25 October. On the 26th we met various government and diplomatic sources and wrote follow-up stories, which in those days were transmitted via our office telex. In emergencies, we could always phone our Tokyo office or another Reuters office elsewhere in the world to dictate stories. But there was a problem in South Korea – we could not make direct foreign calls from our offices or hotels. All such calls had to go through the South Korean telephone exchange system. We had to give the number we sought and then waited for a call back when a connection could be made. This system could take 20 minutes or more for a connection, and was not the greatest way to send out an urgent story.

One story I wrote on return to Seoul from Pusan and Masan contained a paragraph, with which many people in some kind of authoritative position – be they South Koreans or foreigners – would have agreed at the time. It read: 'Western diplomatic sources said there was no immediate threat to the power of President Park, who has about 600,000 regular soldiers, sailors and airmen, and about three million reservists, to maintain security.'

During a telephone call with my Tokyo office mid-way through 26 October it was agreed that I should return to Japan early on Saturday the 27th because the rioting in the south appeared under control. On the evening of the 26th, Oh Ilson and I enjoyed a farewell drink. I thanked him for his good work and returned the keys he had given

me for entry to our office, the telex room and the telex machine. At around 5 a.m. the following morning – Saturday, 27 October – I had a phone call to my hotel room from Oh Ilson. He said: "Something has happened to the president, I have no details." "Is he dead?" I asked. "I don't know," Oh replied, adding that it would take him some time to reach the office. Armed with typewriter and other paraphernalia, I raced out of the Lotte Hotel. Walking to the Hapdong building through quiet streets, two battle tanks were visible under trees guarding government buildings. And, at the entrance to Hapdong, two armed soldiers guarded the main door. Yes, something really was up.

Then came the big blow. I had no office keys. What to do? With a few rugby-style shoulder charges, the fragile office door caved in. But the telex remained a problem – I broke the glass door to the telex office and managed to gain entry. But with no telex key, I was in the dark. Minutes earlier, on entering the main office, I had put through a telephone call to my boss in Tokyo. The Seoul exchange said I would have to wait for some time.

Some 25 minutes later the telephone rang ... It was not the Tokyo office. It was a South Korean government spokesman. The gist of his call was: "President Park Chung Hee was shot and killed last night during an accidental row at a private dinner with KCIA director Kim Jaekyu ... The President died at 7.50 p.m. while being taken to a military hospital ... Two men shot at each other and the president was struck by a stray bullet ... Five people, including President Park and the chief of presidential security forces were killed ... Kim Jaekyu was arrested by the Martial Law Command ... Prime Minister Choi Kyuhah has become acting President under Article 48 of the Constitution. Martial Law has been declared throughout South Korea, except for Cheju ..." That, in a nutshell, was the original news. Fortunately, only minutes after the spokesman put his phone down I received my call from the Reuters Tokyo office. I dictated the story. We were up and running ... but woefully late with the story and the run-up to it as a whole.

It would take some days for the truth of what actually happened to emerge in the public domain. But as the first day rattled on there was almost a non-stop flow of developments, comments and the like. A Swedish journalist, also Tokyo-based, at one stage rushed into our office to say he had heard that two young women had been present at the fateful dinner at the private KCIA restaurant in Seoul. This seemed somewhat fanciful but it was true. The women were identified later as a well-known singer, Shim Soobong, and a university student, Jeong Seunghwa.

My day was enlightened by the arrival from Tokyo of a good chum, Bob Friend, the then Japan-based BBC correspondent for the region. Together for the next few days we worked in tandem from the Reuters office. Late on the first day, Bob and I wrote a story which we believed gave a basically true version of events the previous evening at the KCIA restaurant. The story never went out to our respective organisations

for obvious reasons. But when the government version of events emerged in early November, we found we had been not far from the truth.

The first comprehensive report on what happened at the now infamous dinner came out on November 6 from 'a martial law command spokesman'. He was Major-General Chŏn Tuhwan, who would seize power in a military coup in 1980. Chŏn said the KCIA's Kim Jaekyu had plotted for nearly five months to assassinate Park and take over the government, with the tacit approval of Park's chief aide, Kim Kaewong. He said apart from Park, five other people were in the dining room on the fateful evening of 26 October. They were the two Kims, Park's security chief Cha Chichoi and two women "who had been helping with the dinner". In the first half of 1980, both Kims were executed, as were a KCIA section chief, two KCIA guards and a chauffeur.

Interesting times!