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TEXT OF TELEGRAM 79SEUL 018150

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ACTION SS-30

INFO OCT-01 ADS-00 SSO-00 /031 W
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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2678
INFO AMEMBASSY TOKYO

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 SEUL 18150

EXDIS

E.O. 12065: PDS-3 11/29/89 (GLEYSTEN, W.H.) DR-M

TAGS: PGDV, PINT, KS, US

SUBJECT: **AMBASSADOR'S POLITICAL ASSESSMENT ONE MONTH
AFTER PARK ASSASSINATION**

1. (S) ENTIRE TEXT.

2. BEGIN SUMMARY: LIKE OTHERS I AM IMPRESSED BY THE INTELLIGENCE AND COMPOSURE WITH WHICH THE SOUTH KOREAN PEOPLE AND THEIR GOVERNMENT HAVE CONDUCTED THEMSELVES DURING THE FIRST STAGE OF THE TRANSITION FOLLOWING PARK'S ASSASSINATION ONE MONTH AGO. THE ATMOSPHERE IS FAIRLY RELAXED, AND THERE IS A HEALTHY DEGREE OF CONSENSUS THAT THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE SHOULD BE LIBERALIZED. BUT PARK'S DEATH HAS NOT BROUGHT A SPIRIT OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY INTO KOREAN POLITICS, AND THERE IS STILL A DANGEROUS DISAGREEMENT ABOUT HOW FAR AND HOW FAST LIBERALIZATION SHOULD PROCEED. THE FIRST SIGNS OF UNRELENTING CONFRONTATION HAVE ALREADY APPEARED IN THE FAMILIAR FORM OF EXTREMIST DEMANDS QUICKLY SUPPRESSED BY EXCESSIVELY NERVOUS POLICE.

3. ACTING PRESIDENT CHOI AND HIS INNER CABINET HAVE PRESENTED THE PUBLIC WITH A SENSIBLE PROCEDURE FOR ORDERLY REFORM WHICH SEEMS TO HAVE HAD INITIAL PUBLIC TOLERANCE

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IF NOT ACTIVE SUPPORT, BUT HE HAS YET TO DEFINE IT IN TERMS THAT WILL PREVENT SERIOUS CONTROVERSY OVER THE LONGER RUN. IF CHOI AS PRESIDENT FORMS A COMPETENT CABINET, SPECIFIES WITH SUFFICIENT CLARITY THAT HE INTENDS TO STEP DOWN ROUGHLY ONE YEAR AFTER PRESIDING OVER CONSTITUTIONAL AND ELECTORAL REFORM, AND LIGHTENS THE REINS OF POLITICAL CONSTRAINT, THE ODDS ARE THAT HE AND HIS MILITARY BACKERS WILL HAVE A PERIOD OF GRACE DURING WHICH THE HARDBITTEN CONFRONTATIONALISTS IN OPPOSITION/

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Cat. A - Caption removed;
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DISSIDENT QUARTERS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ENGENDER MUCH PUBLIC SUPPORT. IF HE IS TOO WOBBLY AND VAGUE, THE CRIES OF FOUL PLAY BY THE DISSIDENTS AND OPPOSITION WILL BE REINFORCED BY POPULAR SUSPICION THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT WILL BY ONE OR ANOTHER MEANS EXTEND THE YUSHIN SYSTEM OF RULE. UNFORTUNATELY CHOI HAS LAUNCHED HIS ENTERPRISE IN A FORMALISTIC MANNER WHICH HAS TROUBLED PEOPLE, INCLUDING THOSE WHO HAVEN'T MUCH SYMPATHY FOR THE DISSIDENTS. HE WILL NEED TO BE FAR MORE VIGOROUS IF HE IS TO SUCCEED.

4. IN THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, CHOI FACES SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES... APART FROM A CONSTANT NEED TO DEMONSTRATE HIS CREDITABILITY AS A NEUTRAL INTERIM LEADER, HIS GOVERNMENT MUST COPE WITH THE INHERENT DIFFICULTIES OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN SHORT PERIOD AS WELL AS THE TRICKY PROCESS OF EASING POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS (E.G., MARTIAL LAW, EM-9, AND CENSORSHIP) WITHOUT PULLING THE PLUG. IT MAY ALSO BE ATTACKED FOR STACKING THE DECK AGAINST THE OPPOSITION IN ANY FUTURE ELECTION. CHOI AND COMPANY WILL SHARE POWER IN A COMPLEX NEW PATTERN. KIM CHONG P'IL AND THE DRP WILL TRY TO ENHANCE THEIR POSITION AND MAY WEAKEN CHOI OR CROWD HIM TO THE POINT THAT HE APPEARS TO BE A PUPPET. THE BASICALLY CONSERVATIVE MILITARY WILL

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CONTINUE TO HOLD ALMOST ALL RAW POWER, AT A MINIMUM RETAINING A VETO POWER OVER ANY DEVELOPMENT AND PERHAPS DRAGGING OUT THE PROCESS OF LIBERALIZATION -- ALTHOUGH THEY HAVE NOT SO FAR. THE OPPOSITION, WHICH MAY DIVIDE CONFUSINGLY, WILL ALMOST SURELY PLAY A MUCH LARGER ROLE THAN DURING RECENT YEARS. THE DISSIDENTS, THOUGH THEIR NUMBERS ARE TINY, WILL BE ABLE TO USE OTHER FORCES, SUCH AS THE STUDENTS, AND WILL BE THE MOST LIKELY TRIGGER OF TROUBLE. THE U.S. AND POSSIBLY NORTH KOREA MAY ALSO BE SIGNIFICANT FACTORS.

5. THE OUTCOME OF THIS COMPLEX PROCESS IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT -- EXCEPT THAT IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THE ROK WILL EITHER BE RIPPED APART BY CHAOTIC DISORDER OR BLESSED WITH AN EASY TRANSITION TO REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT. IF CHOI CAN BE STIFFENED TO MOVE WITH SUFFICIENT SPEED AND TO PRESERVE A RELATIVELY FAIR ATMOSPHERE BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION PARTIES, HE MAY BE ABLE TO PULL KOREA THROUGH A VERY DIFFICULT PROCESS. SHOULD HE FAIL, THE SITUATION COULD DETERIORATE TO THE POINT WHERE ELEMENTS WITHIN THE MILITARY WOULD TAKE POWER THROUGH A COUP IN THE NAME OF NATIONAL SELF-PRESERVATION. SO FAR WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO FIND SIGNS OF SUCH A MILITARY MOVE AND ONE IS NOT VERY LIKELY UNLESS AND UNTIL THERE IS A SUBSTANTIAL EROSION OF PUBLIC ORDER. EVEN THEN A MILITARY COUP COULD PROVE HIGHLY UNPOPULAR. IF IT WERE



TO LEAD TO A CONTEST IN THE STREETS, IT WOULD POSE THE MOST SERIOUS KIND OF DANGER FOR KOREA -- AND FOR OURSELVES. AS OF NOW THIS DANGER SEEMS CONTAINED. END SUMMARY.

6. THE ONLY THING I FEEL SAFE IN SAYING ONE MONTH AFTER

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EXDIS

PRESIDENT PARK'S ASSASSINATION IS THAT THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA IS IN MUCH BETTER SHAPE THAN MANY KOREANS AND OUTSIDERS WOULD HAVE ASSUMED -- A TRIBUTE TO THE SURPRISING VIGOR OF KOREAN INSTITUTIONS AND KOREAN AWARENESS OF HOW MUCH THEY HAVE TO LOSE FROM CHAOS, ESPECIALLY IN THE FACE OF THE NORTH KOREAN THREAT. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THOSE COMMITTED TO POLITICAL COMBAT, THOUGHTFUL KOREANS HAVE BEEN QUICK TO GRASP THE CENTRAL ISSUE FACING THEM: HOW TO LIBERALIZE THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE FAST ENOUGH TO SATISFY POPULAR EXPECTATIONS BUT STEADILY ENOUGH TO AVOID THE DANGER OF OVER-REACHING THEMSELVES OR SCARING MILITARY ELEMENTS INTO A MILITARY TAKE-OVER.

7. ALTHOUGH WARNING SIGNS ARE BEGINNING TO APPEAR, THE CURRENT ATMOSPHERE IS RELAXED FOR A COUNTRY UNDER MARTIAL LAW AND SO ACCUSTOMED TO POLITICAL TENSIONS. FEW, IF ANY, PEOPLE ARGUE AGAINST SOME DEGREE OF POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION; THE MILITARY HAVE DISPLAYED CONSIDERABLE STATESMANSHIP IN PLAYING A STABILIZING ROLE AND GOING OUT OF THEIR WAY TO GIVE THE APPEARANCE OF DEFERRING TO CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP; MARTIAL LAW HAS BEEN CONDUCTED WITH SKILL AND A FAIRLY LIGHT TOUCH; THE CIVILIAN BUREAUCRACY HAS NEVER FALTERED; THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY HAS SENSED ITS GREAT STAKE IN NORMALCY; AND THE GENERAL

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PUBLIC -- SO FAR INCLUDING THE MASS OF STUDENTS AND MOST OF THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION -- HAVE ACCOMMODATED THEMSELVES TO CURRENT PLANS WITH SOMETHING BETWEEN POSITIVE SUPPORT AND TOLERANCE. THESE DEVELOPMENTS HAVE REASSURED KOREANS AND GENERATED SOME PREMATURE SELF-CONGRATULATION ABOUT THE ROK'S "MATURITY."

8. YET, THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN AMPLE REMINDERS THAT THIS SOCIETY OF GARLIC AND PEPPER EATING COMBATTANTS HAS NOT

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CHANGED ITS BASIC NATURE. DISSIDENT ELEMENTS AND SOME OF THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION, GROOVED OVER DECADES INTO EXTREMIST PATTERNS BY CONFRONTATION WITH AUTHORITY, HAVE REJECTED THE ACTING GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSED SCENARIO FOR REFORM AND REITERATED THEIR EXTREMIST DEMANDS FOR IMMEDIATE DISMANTLEMENT OF THE YUSHIN SYSTEM; SOME STUDENT ACTIVISTS, INSTEAD OF WELCOMING THE IMPENDING RETURN OF COLLEAGUES PREVIOUSLY BARRED FROM THE UNIVERSITIES BECAUSE OF EM-9 VIOLATIONS, HAVE BEGUN TO AGITATE FOR PUNISHMENT OF ACADEMIC AUTHORITIES WHO COOPERATED WITH THE PARK GOVERNMENT; ELEMENTS OF THE MILITARY, POLICE, AND OTHER SECURITY AUTHORITIES HAVE RUMBLLED ABOUT THE EXCESSES OF THE DISSIDENTS; THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALREADY MADE NEW ARRESTS WHILE FREEING SOME PREVIOUS VIOLATORS; AND, FINALLY, ACTING PRESIDENT CHOI HAS GONE ABOUT HIS "CONSULTATIONS" WITH VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE POPULATION IN A RATHER STILTED CONFUCIAN MANNER WHICH HAS CONVEYED UNNECESSARY QUERTONES OF THE PAST REGIME.

9. THE SCENARIO FOR THE NEXT STAGE SEEMS FAIRLY CLEAR. CHOI WILL BE ELECTED NEXT WEEK AS INTERIM PRESIDENT UNDER YUSHIN PROCEEDURES, AND HE WILL THEN CARRY OUT A CABINET RESHUFFLE WHICH WILL LEAVE THE ECONOMY IN THE SAME TECHNOCRATIC HANDS THAT HAVE LONG GUIDED KOREA AND

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PRESUMABLY ELIMINATE MOST OF PARK'S BAD BOYS. THE SCHEDULE FOR POLITICAL RELAXATION IS LESS CLEAR. ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT HAS NOT DECIDED WHEN TO ACT, IT SEEMS COMMITTED TO LIFTING EM-9, FREEING POLITICAL PRISONERS (INCLUDING KIM TAE CHUNG), AND EASING CENSORSHIP-- PROBABLY IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS. SO LONG AS IT IS NOT FACED WITH WIDESPREAD AND VIOLENT UNREST, IT WILL ALSO LIFT MARTIAL LAW BUT THIS NOW SEEMS UNLIKELY BEFORE NEXT YEAR. THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION, AS DISTINCT FROM DISSIDENTS, WILL PROBABLY GO ALONG WITH THIS SCHEDULE, WHILE REGISTERING THEIR OBJECTION TO WORKING UNDER THE YUSHIN CONSTITUTION.

10. AS POLITICAL COMBAT RESUMES ITS NORMAL SPIRIT, THE FIRST TEST WILL BE WHETHER THE CHOI GOVERNMENT CAN ACT WITH SUFFICIENT VIGOR TO CONVINCE THE OPPOSITION AND POPULAR OPINION OF ITS INTERIM NATURE AND LIMITED MANDATE AND THAT IT IS NOT SIMPLY A VARIATION ON THE YUSHIN THEME. THE INNATE CAUTION OF CHOI HIMSELF COMBINED WITH FEAR AMONG THE SECURITY AUTHORITIES ABOUT MOVING TOO FAST AND PRESSURE BY POLITICAL FORCES JOCKEYING FOR POSITION, COULD RESULT IN VAGUENESS WHICH COULD QUICKLY SOUR THE PUBLIC MOOD. FOR REASONS OF HIS OWN, KIM CHONG P'IL WILL PRESS CHOI TO BE FORTHRIGHT AND THERE ARE SOME OTHERS AMONG THE CIVILIAN AND MILITARY HIERARCHY WITH SUFFICIENT UNDERSTANDING OF POPULAR FEELING TO PUSH CHOI IN THE

*extremist demands
for immediate dismantlement
of YUSHIN!*



RIGHT DIRECTION.

11. ASSUMING THE NEW GOVERNMENT OVERCOMES THIS INITIAL PROCEDURAL OBSTACLE, THE FIRST SUBSTANTIVE ISSUE WILL BE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT. ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT SIDE HAS AGREED TO A CONSENSUS PROCEDURE AND 50-50 COMPOSITION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COMMITTEE IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY,

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