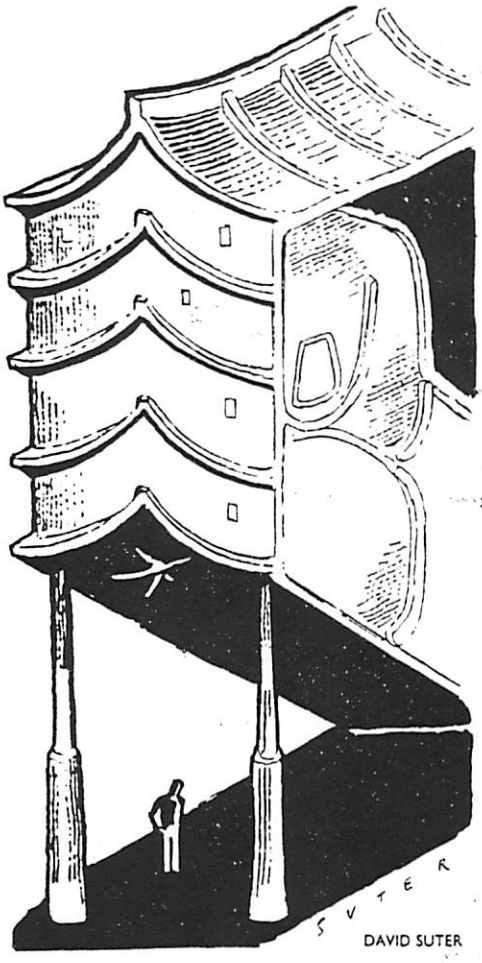
KOREA



DAVID SUTER

STIRRINGS OF RESISTANCE

BY TIM SHORROCK

The moment they found the leaflet I knew I was in trouble.

"Is this yours?" asked a customs agent as I stood in line at Seoul's Kimpo International Airport waiting to catch a Northwest Airlines flight to Tokyo. The leaflet, which the agent triumphantly held, showed an armed soldier guarding a line of young men with their hands tied behind their backs.

"No," I lied.

The agent looked at me suspiciously. "Please come with me."

I felt my stomach tighten as he escorted me to a nearby holding area, where he dumped on a table the entire contents of my bag—files, notes, tape recorder, camera, assorted clippings, socks, toothbrush, and a piece of calligraphy by dissident leader Kim Dae Jung reading TO CARE FOR THE PEOPLE AS IF THEY WERE HEAVEN. Scattered around me were books, magazines, and other subversive materials seized from previous passengers.

It was the photographs that drew the most attention. Inside an envelope hidden in a book, I had tucked two packets of color photographs given to me by dissidents. Two agents studied them and decided to send the photos upstairs to a superior who, I was told, would decide their fate. For the next hour-and-a-half, I was besieged with questions: Who gave you these photos? Don't you know we have laws about taking underground literature out of Korea? What were your motives in coming to our country?

I'm a journalist, I protested, an American citizen, the people in these pictures are friends of mine, you have no right to do this—all the usual isn't-this-a-democracy stuff. But it didn't go over.

The leaflets I was carrying, the agents explained, were written by "bad elements." The photographs showed the "ugly side" of Korea; if I took them with me, North Korea would "use them to attack South Korea." What's worse, I didn't understand the country's "special situation," they told me. And I was informed that, for "security reasons," the airport authorities had decided to keep the pictures. I was free to leave.

The photographs depicted two of the most volatile subjects in South Korea today: labor repression and the 1980 Kwangju Uprising. One set, taken in a Seoul hospital two weeks before, showed a group of human-rights and labor activists who had been severely beaten by a gang of thugs outside a factory; the activists had come to support a sit-in by workers protesting a government decision not to recognize their union. Among the beaten was an eighty-two-year-old man who first became involved in dissident politics during the anti-Japanese, anti-colonial movement of the 1920s. The most seriously injured was Pang Young Sok, a former textile worker and a leading figure in South Korea's growing labor movement.

The other set of photos was taken during the uprising that shook the city of Kwangju and the province of South Cholla in May 1980. Following the military coup led by General Chun Doo Hwan, citizens in Kwangju rose up after Chun's paratroopers savagely attacked peaceful demonstrators. Up to 3,000 people may have died in the fighting.

But for one five-day spell, the area surrounding Kwangju was freed from military rule. The photos I possessed showed rare scenes from the liberation—as the Cholla people call it—of Mokpo, a port city fifty kilometers south of Kwangju. In one photo, thousands of people crowded into the city square to call for an end to military rule. In another, a line of young men and women marched through the streets holding a South Korean flag and waving banners reading WE DEMAND DEMOCRACY AND UNIFICATION and CHUN DOO HWAN, RESIGN!

As I stormed out of the customs gate to meet my delayed plane, one of the agents turned to me with an embarrassed look on his face. "I hope this doesn't give you a bad impression of my country," he said.

I have visited South Korea four times in the last five years. Each time I have come, the dissident movement seems stronger, broader, more confident than the time before. Powerful organizational ties and alliances have been formed among militant unions, journalists, students, farmers, and church groups—all working for an end to military rule and what they see as South Korea's dependence on the United States and Japan. By working together for a change in the Constitution so Koreans can directly elect the president, and by supporting each other through demonstrations and other actions, this budding movement has begun to present a real threat to the Chun government—and indirectly to U.S. policy.

"This is a strongly nationalistic move-

Tim Shorrock is a free-lance writer based in Washington, D.C. He lived in South Korea from 1959 to 1961 and has visited there often. During his most recent trip in 1985, he conducted research on South Korea's labor situation for a U.S. labor union and for the North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea.

The dissidents seem more confident than ever. A dynamic labor movement, a student campaign for democracy, and a popular opposition party have the generals worried

ment," a teacher in Kwangju told me. "We see the implications of U.S. ties as a barrier to unification, in the dependency of our country on foreign powers, in the unholy alliance between your corporations and our entrepreneurs. If the United States doesn't see our movement properly and continues to support the Korean government, then it will contribute to something quite unfortunate. It's very possible that you will have another Vietnam here, where you have a liberation front that is very anti-American."

As it is, the United States is already being viewed as an imperialist and interventionist power, providing key support for the military dictatorship and perpetuating the division of the peninsula. U.S. cultural centers in major cities have been firebombed, U.S. government and business facilities occupied by protesters. American flags burned at demonstrations. Student leaflets have openly criticized the presence of U.S. troops, and peace groups within the churches have demanded the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from the country.

Many activists are studying the history of the Philippines, Nicaragua, and El Salvador to find parallels in their own situation. They are looking toward mass-based social revolution as the only path to democracy and reunification with the North, the stated goals of their movement.

The opposition forces have gathered impressive speed over the past two years:

¶ More than 150 unions have been organized, many of them under the leadership of a dynamic, largely underground labor movement with close ties to the democratic opposition. Recently, unions have begun to pressure big business groups and the government through strikes, sit-ins, and street demonstrations. One of the most significant actions occurred last June, when 1,000 workers at six factories in Seoul's Kuro Industrial Complex launched sit-in strikes to protest the arrests of union leaders at the nearby Daewoo Apparel Company—the first sympathy strikes since the late 1940s.

¶ Students have begun a major nationwide campaign for democratization, labor rights, and an end to U.S. intervention. Last spring, student activists stood up to government intimidation and formed their own autonomous organizations on campuses, which have spearheaded the movement. Last May, a group of twenty-five student leaders occupied the library of the United States Information Service (USIS) in Seoul, demanding that the United States apologize for its role in suppressing the Kwangju Uprising. As the government has turned to harsh measures to crush their movement, some students have gone to the extreme of taking over U.S. banks and commercial organizations, occupying (and sometimes burning) government facilities, and fighting riot police with Molotov cocktails. In recent weeks, a number of protests have focused on U.S. pressure to open the South Korean market to foreign goods.

¶ Strengthened by the spectacular showing of the opposition New Democratic Party (NKDP), which swept every city in last February's election on a platform dedicated to ending military rule, the opposition forces now have the Chun government on the defensive.

To regain the upper hand, the government has increasingly opted for force—the only instrument at its disposal. Two thousand or more workers have been fired and blacklisted for union activity, while more than seventy trade unionists have been imprisoned. The Ministry of Culture and Information launched a broad attack on the *minjung* ("people's") cultural movement, arresting poets, artists, and novelists, and confiscating paintings and literature that portray the lives of ordinary workers and farmers. To keep the media in their place, the KCIA, Korea's intelligence agency, abducted three editors and writers from the prominent *Dong-A-Ilbo* newspaper and severely beat them for printing a story against government wishes.

Since July, hundreds of students have been arrested, including members of the *Sanmintu*, the group that organized last May's occupation of the USIS library. Scores of them have been charged with violations of the National Security Law and face years in prison. As of November, there were 500 political prisoners in South Korea, more than were jailed at the height of the repression under Park Chung Hee.

What's worse, the police forces have been turning more frequently to torture. According to sources in Korea, several prominent activists now in custody have been tortured with electric shock and other gruesome techniques and then forced to declare themselves communists and North Korean agents. In this way, Chun is hoping to paint the emerging student and youth movement as a plot hatched in Pyongyang. Dissidents and opposition politicians have formed a committee and are appealing to the United Nations to investigate the torture charges.

Many Koreans view Chun's recent crackdown as the act of a desperate man who knows he lacks legitimacy. "Government power has begun to lose the initiative to control Korean politics, in the campus and in the political circles," former opposition party leader Kim Dae Jung told me.

South Korea, for all its political repression, is highly touted in the West as a model of Third World economic development. But the fruits of growth are not widely shared.

"The wealth here is monopolized by a minority, the big companies like Hyundai, Samsung, and Daewoo," said an economist whom the Chun government banned from teaching for three years.

These huge conglomerates—called *jaebol* in Korean—produce everything from ships to textiles, and they control the bulk of the country's exports. With special treatment from the government in the forms of export and import licenses, low taxes, unenforced labor and environmental standards, and low-interest credit, the *jaebol* have gained tremendous control over the economy. Since 1980, the ten biggest companies' share of the Korean GNP (measured in sales) increased from 29 per cent to an astounding 72 per cent in 1984.

But this expansion has come at the expense of the bulk of the Korean population—its low-paid workers. Household income and labor income have grown at only half the rate of per-capita income over the last twenty years. And, according to government figures, three million people—30 per cent of the country's labor force—earn less than 100,000 won per month, considered the minimum living cost for a single person.

"You see, the minority monopolies are wealthy, while the people are so poor," the economist explained. "In this way, the two classes confront each other. That feeling pervades our social atmosphere. Who knows when it will explode?"

The government is keenly aware that social unrest could break out almost any time. Three-and-a-half years ago, the Ninth Division of the Korean Army was permanently stationed near Seoul to prepare for domestic unrest, according to a recently released document from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. Chun has also deployed thousands of riot police through-

An Interview with Kim Dae Jung

Kim Dae Jung, South Korea's best-known dissident, was imprisoned and sentenced to death for treason in 1980 on trumped-up charges of instigating the Kwangju Uprising. Freed in 1981 after strong pressures from around the world, he moved to the United States, where he spent four years writing and lecturing. Last year, with former political rival Kim Young Sam, he organized the Council to Promote Democracy and returned to South Korea to rejoin the democratic movement.

Though hated by the Korean military, Kim is basically a conservative. Many dissidents mistrust him, fearing that he may put his political ambitions above the broader needs of the opposition. They also criticize what they consider to be his pro-American attitude. But his courageous struggle against military rule has also earned him widespread admiration and respect.

I interviewed Kim last June, a month before he was placed under house arrest again. Here are some excerpts from our conversation:

WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Q: Was the United States responsible for the Kwangju Uprising and its bloody suppression?

KIM: You dispatched a Korean division to Kwangju to keep order, but before sending troops, you should have examined which side was keeping order—the Kwangju people or the paratroopers. The Kwangju people kept order; paratroopers broke order. They massacred peaceful demonstrators. They massacred many young men after binding them. Their hands were bound by their sides, but they were killed. They were unable to fight. So you should have criticized the paratroopers' side, not the Kwangju people's side. Your attitude was not just, not fair.

If America had not sent one division to Kwangju, Chun Doo Hwan would not have succeeded in getting power. If the Americans didn't support that paratroopers' massacre, then our people would have risen up for democracy in other cities. We could have succeeded in restoring democracy. Chun was not so strong then; he was not supported by our people. Only America supported him.

Q: Do you favor the withdrawal of the 40,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea?

KIM: In the future, we can realize strong security because we can enjoy the people's voluntary support and also force North Korea to have a sincere dialogue to bring peace to the Korean peninsula. We would raise conditions for a permanent peace treaty to ask American troops to withdraw from South Korea. But at the present, it is too early for us to ask for the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea because there is no strong security under dictatorial rule. The dictatorial government fails to get the people's voluntary and full support.

Q: What kind of economic system would you like to see in South Korea?

KIM: Well, we are supporting the free-market system. We never want to damage our ability to promote exports. So we don't support any laborer's request to ask a higher wage compared to promotion of productivity. On the other hand, our country has for more than ten years promoted exports on the international market with a low wage. But the low-wage era has passed. There is the Chinese competition—they are competing with Korea at a far lower wage. So we must escape the need for such an era.

Now we are seeking high-technology production. To succeed in such a high-tech era, we must liberate two groups: one is businessmen. In this country, all businessmen are under government control. Even though they have become rich men, there is no freedom of businessmen. We must liberate them so we can have free competition and fair competition. And also we must liberate our laborers from suppression. Only when laborers are active and willing to produce very good quality goods can we succeed in high-technology.

Q: How unified is the opposition movement?

KIM: The democratic movement is well unified. Kim Young Sam and I are maintaining close cooperation—no split. And we are seeking a very healthy common goal: Western-style democracy, a free-market system, and supporting the rights of consumers and laborers. We are seeking a very prudent social-welfare system. And we support the national security. We criticize America and Japan, but we don't want to become anti-American and anti-Japanese.

Q: How hopeful are you that democracy will return to South Korea?

KIM: I am carefully hopeful. But whether we can reach our democracy easily and peacefully may depend on whether we can avoid military involvement in politics or not—and that depends mainly on the American commander's attitude. As long as the American military commander has the right to control all Korean military forces of 600,000 troops, the American commander must take the responsibility to prevent military involvement in a coup.

You know, when there was the Korean War thirty years ago, there was democracy—in wartime. We had freedom of speech, local autonomy, direct election of the president, the independence of the national assembly and the judicial branch. But at peacetime now, we have lost all of those freedoms. In wartime, our people's per-capita income was only $16; now it has soared to $2,000. But we can't enjoy the same freedom we had when it was $16. How can we understand this?

—T.S.

out Seoul. On nearly every major intersection sits a bus filled with these troops, who spend much of their time idle, smoking or playing cards, waiting for a demonstration. The buses are usually accompanied by ugly black armored carriers that spew pepper fog, a painful and dangerous gas banned in the United States and West Germany.

Plainclothes police, dressed in white jackets with little buttons on their lapels identifying their agency—military police, regular police, and riot police—carefully watch such buildings as the American embassy or the United States Information Office for any signs of trouble. These officers are said to be recruited from the gangs of hoodlums rounded up during Chun's "purification drives" in 1980, who were given the choice of going to jail or joining the police. They are tough, trained in martial arts, and given a solid education in anti-communist ideology.

I saw these stormtroopers in action several times. One day, as I emerged from a subway, several hundred of them were breaking up a demonstration of slum dwellers protesting forced evictions. On another occasion, I observed them monitoring a textile-workers' strike. By the end

of my visit, I had begun to recognize some of these "undercover" police.

Kwangju is by far the most explosive issue in Korea today. Five years after the uprising, the full truth of how and why it occurred has yet to come out. Last spring, members of the opposition party initiated an investigation within the National Assembly, but Chun's Democratic Justice Party, which holds an automatic majority, blocked the move. It was this action that sparked the student occupation of the USIS building last May.

Chun's party blocked the investigation because Chun himself was directly involved in putting down the uprising. "You're really talking about how the government took power," one foreign diplomat told me. "The responsibility goes right to the president. That's why it's so threatening."

But the issue of Kwangju has serious implications for the United States as well: During the uprising, the American commander of the joint U.S.-Korean military forces—General John Wickham, now chief of staff of the U.S. Army—gave Chun permission to deploy Korean troops from the border with North Korea and to enter Kwangju and put down the rebellion. This single act has put a bloody stain on U.S.-Korean relations that may never be erased.

American officials in Korea deny any direct responsibility for the violence that occurred. The U.S. version—explained to me by foreign diplomats—blames Korean paratroopers for the initial violence, emphasizing that these troops were not under direct U.S. operational control. But from that point on, the official Korean and American versions merge. During the five days when Kwangju was in citizen hands, the diplomats say, the city was in "chaos." And when the troops from the Twentieth Division mobilized by Wickham entered Kwangju, they "retook the city in a very peaceful fashion, and acted very responsibly. This was the limit of [U.S.] involvement."

That version is a crude and self-serving distortion of the truth and explains why American credibility in Korea is at such a low point.

I visited Kwangju for two days on my recent trip, shortly after the government had issued an "official" report that blamed the uprising on "unruly elements" and labeled stories of mass killings "groundless rumors." Accompanied by an old friend who speaks fluent Korean and has lived in the country for more than thirty years, I was able to meet and converse with many people, including the leaders of a committee formed to build a memorial to those who died during the uprising. Their story is chilling, their message powerful.

In an interview session that lasted from late morning until evening, the committee members—two ministers, a trial lawyer, a prominent judge, the director of a local YWCA, a teacher, and a pharmacist from the nearby town of Mokpo—laid out, in sometimes painful detail, the events of May 17 through May 26, 1980.

They described those days as only people who lived through them could: the murderous rampage by paratroopers on the afternoon of May 18, when hundreds of people were bayonetted to death, their bodies dumped in trucks and taken to still-unknown burial sites; the rising disbelief and anger of the people witnessing the killings; the seizure of arms on May 21; the liberation of the city from May 22 to 26; the forty-eight hours of agonizing negotiation between the "Reconciliation Committee" and the military, and the pre-dawn attack on the provincial capital, where the last voices of resistance were stilled.

The death toll was far higher than the 191 claimed by the government and repeated by most of the Western media during last spring's occupation of the USIS building. Kwangju's official records for June 1980 showed a dramatic rise in deaths for the month of May—up from an average of 200 a month to 2,627. Dismissing this figure as the usual "groundless rumor," the government launched an investigation last June and charged a former city employee with "falsifying" records.

Many people in Kwangju believe that the unprovoked attack by the paratroopers was designed by Chun to goad people to rebel and thus give Chun a rationale—"saving the nation"—for his seizure of power.

"The government blames the people here for the violence," said one of the ministers. "This is not true. People rose up because the paratroopers came here and were cruel and brutal, and the people were enraged. We believe the incident was set up to provoke this kind of reaction. It was a deliberate trap."

The five-day period of liberation differed sharply from the government's claim of "chaos" in the streets. Witnesses who were in the city said it was a time of sorrow, common suffering, joy, and sharing. They described a city run in a cooperative manner, with water, food, and electricity rationed, and buses and taxis operated free.

"There was a normal, very orderly process during the time of our liberation," recalls a minister. "There was no breaking into banks, no looting. For five days this situation prevailed. There were no police or army—just the people, all young and old, together, functioning in a very humanitarian manner." To call this "chaos," he said angrily, "is a bald-faced lie."

The witnesses also criticize the actions of the army when it recaptured the city. "How can your embassy say these troops were orderly?" asked the lawyer, who was imprisoned for three years after the uprising. "Students guarding ammunition came out waving a white flag with their hands in the air and were shot and killed in cold blood. Lots of innocent people were killed. The troops came in as if they were capturing an enemy land. And they said no reprisals, but thousands were rounded up, tortured, and put on trial. That was the 'orderly' Twentieth Division."

The controversy surrounding Kwangju won't go away. "The Kwangju problem must be resolved before the Korean political situation is properly normalized," says one judge. "And the basic way to resolve it is democratization in this country. The will of the people is toward democracy. America needs to recognize this process is taking place and to give support."

Despite differences in outlook and perspective, South Korea's dissidents all share the view that military rule must end, and that South Korea must regain some independence in its relations with the United States. For the immediate future, they agree on two broad goals.

First, they want an open and free presidential election in 1987. This will require changing the constitution, which mandates a system of indirect elections perpetuating military control over politics. Second, they want a restoration of democracy so they can freely discuss and debate such issues as economic development, labor rights, and reunification. They have begun to take their protests to the streets—the only place they think their struggle can be won.

If an open election is to be held in 1987, the constitution will have to be changed soon.

Chun and his military and corporate allies are adamant that the system remain intact so they can hang on to the reins of power; but if they move to suppress the movement and spark widespread unrest, they risk disrupting the Olympic Games scheduled for 1988 as well as driving away investors at a time when the economy is suffering from a severe recession and global protectionism.

The attitude of the U.S. Government toward the democratic movement will also play an important role. Thirty-five years after the end of the Korean War, 40,000 American ground troops and several hundred American nuclear weapons are stationed in the country. If the Reagan Administration persists in supporting Chun and is perceived as opposing the demands for political rights and independence, the movement will grow more radical, and the United States will completely lose whatever influence it could have exerted with such conservative dissidents as Kim Dae Jung.

"You should tell your people this," one retired journalist from Mokpo told me. "Unless your government supports the flowering of democracy here, our long-time relations will have come to a bitter end." ■